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SEA SCALLOP GEAR CHANGE PROPOSED TO PROTECT SEA TURTLES

NOAA Fisheries Service today proposed a change for sea scallop gear that will prevent loggerhead sea turtles from entering dredges, where they can be injured or killed during fishing operations. Loggerhead sea turtles are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

“We believe this proposed action can reduce the risk of injury and death among loggerhead sea turtles by keeping them out of the dredge,” said Mary Colligan, chief of the Protected Species Division of NOAA Fisheries Services’ Northeast Regional office.

Sea scallops are harvested mostly with dredges, comprising a heavy bag made of steel rings attached to a steel frame at the front, and a bar at the back of the bag. The frame keeps the bag open, and the bar maintains the bag’s shape as it drags along the ocean bottom. Turtles that enter the dredges can be injured or killed by physical trauma, drowning, or being dropped on the deck of a boat when the bag is hauled back and emptied.

The modification proposed today would require a “mat” across the dredge opening, made from both horizontal and vertical chains that are spaced widely enough to allow sea scallops to enter, but closely enough to prevent turtles from entering the bags.

The mats would be required on all sea scallop dredges used by federal permit holders fishing in the Mid-Atlantic from May 1 until November 30, the time of year when the sea turtles are most likely to be in the area where sea scalloping occurs. Turtle takes have not been documented elsewhere in the Northeast sea scallop fishery.

Current estimates are that up to 749 loggerhead turtles are taken in the Mid-Atlantic scallop dredge fishery annually, of which 64 percent (479) are likely to be seriously injured or killed, and 36 percent (270) are likely to survive if released. Field experiments were conducted with the chain mat under typical fishing conditions during 2003 and 2004 by vessels concurrently using one modified and one unmodified dredge. Eight turtle interactions were reported, all in the unmodified gear. Sea scallop catches were slightly less with the modified gear than with the unmodified gear.

Sea scallops brought in \$226.8 million to Northeast harvesters in 2003, second only to lobsters in top-grossing species in the region, and propelled New Bedford to first in landings value among the nation’s ports.

The proposed rule was published in the Federal Register on May 28, 2005. Comments must be received by 5 p.m. EST on June 27, 2005. Comments can be submitted by e-mail to scallopchainmat@noaa.gov, electronically at www.regulations.gov or www.nero.noaa.gov/nero/regs/com.html, by fax at 978-281-9394 or by regular mail to: Attn: Mary A. Colligan, Assistant Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries Service, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930, ATTN: Sea Turtle Conservation Measures, Proposed Rule. For further information, contact Ellen Keane at NOAA Fisheries Service, 978-281-9300 x6526 or Barbara Schroeder, 301-713-1401.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through research to better understand atmospheric and climate variability and to manage wisely our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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