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Public comment period begins for court ordered NOAA proposal designed to protect sea turtles from certain trawling activities

NOAA's Fisheries Service is accepting public comment on a proposed rule requiring turtle excluder devices (TEDs) for skimmer, pusher-head, and wing-net shrimp trawls in Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic shrimp fisheries.

NOAA's Fisheries Service is releasing the proposed rule, in compliance with a court agreement, to ensure public input on whether a final rule is warranted. No decision has been made, and any final rule would be informed by important public and stakeholder feedback and would provide industry time to comply with a new standard.

NOAA's Fisheries Service proposal is based on steps and technologies a large portion of the industry has already successfully deployed, which have helped reduce turtle mortality. Vessels using skimmer, pusher-head, and wing-net trawls currently fish using shorter tow times—the amount of time a net is pulled underwater—which are difficult to enforce.

State and federal scientists documented an increase in sea turtle strandings throughout the northern Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and 2011. Turtles strand for many reasons, and scientists are still investigating the causes. However, preliminary information suggests some of these turtles drowned, which is commonly associated with fishery interactions.

“As fishery managers, we need to strike a balance between conservation and commerce, as our agency is concerned with both,” said Dr. Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. “This enables us to ensure a successful recovery of turtle populations while maintaining an economically viable shrimp industry.”

If adopted, this rule will be the next step in a long-term strategy for sea turtle conservation that is designed to reduce bycatch, turtles caught unintentionally, throughout the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico fisheries. More than 20 years of scientific study shows that TEDs are effective in reducing sea turtle bycatch, as well as the unintentional catch of other species such as sturgeon.

“Although TEDs are generally accepted throughout the southeastern otter trawl fishery, the changes to our gear took time and cooperation between the industry and NOAA's Fisheries Service to successfully implement,” said John Williams, executive director for the Southern Shrimp Alliance, a non-profit alliance of shrimp industry members. “We encourage the agency to do the same with the skimmer trawl fishermen – to incorporate TEDs successfully with the least impact possible to this important fishery.”

The next step in the rule-making process includes a public comment periods and hearings. NOAA's Fisheries Service will hold five public hearings in May and June:

- Morehead City, N.C.: May 30 from 2 p.m. – 4 p.m. at the Crystal Coast Civic Center, 3505 Arendell Street

- Larose, La.: June 4 from 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. at the Larose Regional Park and Civic Center, 307 East 5th Street
- Belle Chasse, La.: June 5 from 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. at the Belle Chasse Community Center, 8398 Highway 23
- D'Iberville, MS. : June 6, 2012, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. at the L.H. "Red" Barnett Senior Center, 10450 Lamey Bridge Road
- Bayou La Batre, Ala.: June 13 from 2 p.m. – 4 p.m. at the Bayou La Batre Community Center, 12745 Padgett Switch Road

Public comment on the proposed rule may also be submitted in writing until July 9. All comments will be part of the public record, and are generally posted without change for public viewing to <http://www.regulations.gov>. All personal identifying information voluntarily submitted by the commenter, such as name and address, may be publicly accessible. Confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information should not be submitted.

To submit comments electronically, visit <http://www.regulations.gov> and enter docket number "NOAA-NMFS-2012-0095" into the Search box to reach the web form. Attachments of up to 10 MB will be accepted in Microsoft Word, Excel, WordPerfect, or Adobe PDF file formats.

Comments submitted by mail can be directed to:
 NOAA Fisheries Service
 Southeast Regional Office
 Protected Resources Division
 263 13th Avenue South
 St. Petersburg, FL 33701-5505.

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