



NOAA NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Contact: Allison Garrett
727-551-5750

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 22, 2017

NOAA releases more than 200 Florida loggerhead sea turtles into the wild
Fisheries Scientists Complete Annual Turtle Excluder Device Testing

NOAA Fisheries' scientists and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) will release 215 loggerhead sea turtles into the Atlantic Ocean off the Florida coast on Thursday, June 22. The sea turtles were used to test turtle friendly fishing gear used in commercial fisheries.

"The turtles are part of a two-week study conducted annually in mid-June by NOAA scientists to evaluate the effectiveness of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in shrimp trawls," said, NOAA biologist Ben Higgins. "This work is critical to the survival of threatened and endangered sea turtles."

TEDs are a component of a shrimp trawl. They enable sea turtles to escape from fishing nets, while minimizing shrimp loss. NOAA Fisheries Service made TEDs mandatory in 1989. Prior to their use, thousands of sea turtles drowned each year in shrimp trawls. Scientists and managers use the data obtained from this important research to continually improve the technology of TED designs which can be approved for use throughout the shrimping industry.

"A key to the reliability of this research is that it entails the use of live, captive-raised loggerhead sea turtles," said biologist Higgins. "Our scientists spend more than 30 days conditioning these turtles in a semi-wild environment, preparing them for release into the wild."

NOAA Fisheries scientists have been testing new and existing TED designs annually since the mid-1980s. During the testing, which occurs just southeast of Panama City Beach, FL., divers observe and film sea turtles' behavior to document how well they are able to escape from TED-equipped shrimp trawls.

Each year, NOAA Fisheries Service biologists raise approximately 200 loggerhead sea turtles, hatched in Florida, at NOAA Fisheries' Sea Turtle Facility in Galveston, Texas. At two years old, they are returned to Florida for this research, where each turtle undergoes brief TED testing for about 10 minutes. Once the research is complete, biologists release all of the turtles unharmed into the wild. "From what we can tell, our evidence indicates that the turtles we release become fully assimilated into the wild stocks," Higgins added. "They do not appear to suffer any adverse effects from being raised in captivity or used in the research." On average, the turtles are 18 inches long and weigh 15 pounds.

Biologists release the turtles into the Atlantic Ocean where wild turtles of the same size and maturity are found. Once released, the turtles begin seeking natural sources of food, and may venture into passes and bays where crabs and other shellfish, the staple of their diet, are commonly found.

This year, the United States Coast Guard from Station Fort Pierce will provide vessel support for the release of 201 turtles offshore from Ft. Pierce. Fourteen additional turtles will be released along the shoreline.

NOAA Fisheries Service would like to remind the public that it is a violation of the Endangered Species Act to touch, handle or purposely interact with sea turtles. Even small sea turtles will bite people and can inflict painful wounds if handled or provoked. Although it is common for people to encounter sea turtles in areas that are popular recreational destinations such as beaches, docks and piers, people should not touch them. A natural part of turtle behavior includes foraging.

Turtles that exit the water or appear to be experiencing difficulty swimming may have been injured. People who see sea turtles that appear to be in distress, injured, or dead should not touch or remove anything from these turtles and should contact FWC's Division of Law Enforcement immediately at 1-888-404-FWCC (3922). They will ensure the turtles are examined and treated by qualified wildlife professionals.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management, and enforcement.

###