

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
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NOAA 02-R117

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 11, 2002

**NOAA Fisheries Seeks Comment on Proposed Seasonal Gillnet Restrictions to
Protect Whales Off Georgia and Florida**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is seeking comment on a proposed rule to prohibit nighttime deployments of gillnet straight sets from November 15 through March 31 each year off the coasts of Georgia and Florida. Prohibiting straight sets at night would reduce the chance of large whales becoming entangled in the gillnets.

In a straight set, the gillnet is placed in a line in the water column. Straight sets pose a higher level of risk of entanglement to whales at night because they are left in the water for long periods of time and whales are much more difficult to spot in the dark.

This prohibition was recommended to NOAA Fisheries by the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team, composed of fishermen, scientists, conservationists and state and federal officials who advise NOAA Fisheries on whale conservation and management issues. The restriction would apply to the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area, 27 degrees fifty-one minutes north latitude (near Sebastian Inlet, Fla.) to 32 degrees north latitude (near Savannah, Ga.) extending from the shore seaward to 80 degrees west longitude.

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“NOAA Fisheries continues to monitor the potential for net entanglements of the western North Atlantic right whale, which is the rarest of all large whales and one of the most endangered species in the world,” said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries. “This restriction on gillnets will provide further, necessary protection for these magnificent creatures.”

Scientists estimate that approximately 300 of the animals are alive today. Since 1970, scientists have documented approximately 50 right whale mortalities. The majority of these deaths are due to unknown or natural causes, but approximately 20 were attributed to ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear. In addition to these mortalities, injuries from interactions with fishing gear are documented each year, with over 60 percent of right whales bearing evidence of entanglement. From mid-November through March each year, Atlantic right whales migrate to waters off the coasts of Florida and Georgia for nursing and calving, which often puts them right in the middle of gillnet fishing grounds.

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available by contacting: Katie Moore, NMFS, Southeast Region, 727-570-5312; Diane Borggaard, NMFS, Northeast Region, 978-281-9145; or Patricia Lawson, NMFS, Office of Protected Resources, 301-713-2322. The proposed rule may be also be downloaded: http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/whaletrp/st_set.pdf

Comments on proposed rule must be postmarked or transmitted by facsimile by 5 p.m., EST, on May 28, 2002. Written comments may be sent to: Chief, Protected Resources Division, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702-2432; or faxed to (727) 570-5517.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.