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**NOAA FISHERIES URGE BOATERS TO PROTECT SEA TURTLES
AND MARINE MAMMALS DURING FOURTH OF JULY BUSY WEEKEND**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is raising the public's awareness of the heightened potential for boat strikes or harassment to bottlenose dolphins and sea turtles in the Sarasota Bay area during the busy Fourth of July boating weekend. The area will host the annual Suncoast Offshore Grand Prix powerboat races, which have been a holiday tradition since 1985.

While the powerboat races comprise only two days of a full week's festivities, thousands of enthusiasts, aboard boats of all sizes and configurations, will converge on the Sarasota Bay area to observe the spectacle. The combination of high-speed powerboats and heavy concentration of spectator boats pose considerable danger to the dolphins and sea turtles that call the bay home.

"Bottlenose dolphins and other marine mammals as well as five species of sea turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico, including Sarasota Bay," said David Bernhart, Chief of NOAA Fisheries' southeast region protected resources division. "All these animals are protected by federal law – sea turtles by the Endangered Species Act, and dolphins by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. These acts prohibit people from attempting to harass, hunt, kill, capture, pursue, or otherwise harm marine mammals and sea turtles."

The dramatic increase in spectator boats to the area for these races can not only potentially harm the creatures but can alter their normal behavior patterns. Therefore, NOAA Fisheries urges everyone to be extremely cautious around marine mammals and sea turtles.

"The best thing people can do to help protect the health of protected marine animals and stay safe themselves is to maintain a distance of at least 50 yards when observing marine mammals and sea turtles," added Bernhart. NOAA Fisheries has published a marine mammal and sea turtle viewing guidelines brochure that's available free from our office and on the Internet at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/MMWatch/MMViewing.html.

(MORE)

In addition, boaters should not only maintain a safe distance from marine mammals and sea turtles, but:

never encircle or trap them in any way;
if marine mammals or sea turtles approach you, always put your vessel's engine in neutral and allow them to pass;
never pursue or attempt to feed them.

Dr. Randall Wells, director of Mote Marine Laboratory's Center for Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Research, has conducted bottlenose dolphin research in the Sarasota Bay area for more than 34 years. He is currently monitoring four generations of resident dolphins, whose population numbers 145.

Mote Marine Laboratory's Center for Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Research studies the health, structure and dynamics of bottlenose dolphins in Sarasota Bay and the natural and human-related factors that affect them. Mote staff also study and document the status of shoreline habitat and sea turtle nesting trends in the area.

"We are currently in the peak of dolphin calving season, with 8 newborns so far this year. Our research has determined that these naive babies and their mothers are the most vulnerable dolphins to boat collisions during this period," said Wells.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries 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 is an agency of the Department of Commerce.

NOAA Fisheries is committed to marine mammal and sea turtle conservation in the Sarasota area. If you see a bottlenose dolphin or sea turtle violation, please call the NOAA Fisheries' Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964. To report marine mammal stranding or injury, please call 1-305-862-2850. To report a sea turtle stranding or injury, please call 1-305-361-4595.

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