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NOAA RELEASES 120 FLORIDA LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLES INTO THE WILD *Fisheries Scientists Complete Annual Turtle Excluder Device Testing*

NOAA Fisheries Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) scientists will release 120 loggerhead sea turtles into the Atlantic Ocean off the Florida coast on Monday, July 2. The United States Coast Guard will provide vessel support to release 96 of the turtles offshore Ft. Pierce and the remainder will be released from shore into the Indian River Lagoon near Sebastian Inlet.

The turtles are part of a two-week study conducted annually in mid-June by NOAA Fisheries scientists to evaluate the effectiveness of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) in shrimp trawls. TEDs were designed to be attached to shrimp trawls enabling sea turtles to escape from the fishing nets, while minimizing the loss of shrimp. 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 determine whether innovative TED designs can be effectively used throughout the shrimping industry.

“A key to the reliability of this research is that it entails the use of live loggerhead sea turtles,” said NOAA Fisheries Service biologist Ben Higgins. “Our scientists spend more than 40 days conditioning these captive-raised turtles in a semi-wild environment, preparing them for release into the wild.”

Each year, between 100-180 loggerhead sea turtles, hatched in Florida, are raised 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. Biologists then release the turtles unharmed into the wild once the research is complete.

“From what we can tell, our evidence indicates that the turtles we release become fully assimilated into the wild stocks,” Higgins said. “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.

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 videotape sea turtles’ behavior to document how well they are able to escape from TED-equipped shrimp trawls.

The turtles are released in areas of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean where wild turtles of the same size and maturity are found. Once released, the turtles begin seeking sources of

food, and may venture into passes and bays where crabs and other shellfish, the staple of their diet, are commonly found. This is natural behavior for young sea turtles. People should allow them to forage unmolested, as 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 or take sea turtles as it is a violation of the Endangered Species Act, and moreover, even small sea turtles will bite people and can inflict painful wounds if handled or provoked.

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. 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.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

Galveston Laboratory: <http://galveston.ssp.nmfs.gov/galv>

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

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