

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Issues Emergency Rule to Protect Endangered and Threatened Sea Turtles along Eastern North Carolina and Virginia Coast *Large Mesh Gillnet Fishery Closed*

NOAA Fisheries announces the closure of waters along the coasts of Virginia and eastern North Carolina and in the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay to fishing with gillnets with a mesh size 6 inches or larger. The closed area includes all Atlantic Ocean waters between Cape Hatteras and 38° N. (approximately the Virginia-Maryland border), west of 75° W. longitude, and the waters in lower Chesapeake Bay, east of the Hampton Roads bridge-tunnel and south of a line drawn between Old Point Comfort and Cape Charles City. Fishermen have until 11:59 p.m. on May 13, 2000 to retrieve any gillnets with 6 inch mesh or greater that are already set. This closure is in effect through June 11, 2000.

An unprecedented number of dead sea turtles have washed ashore on the North Carolina Outer Banks in April and May. During two concentrated stranding events from April 14-17 and May 3-8, a total of 280 turtles have been found between the town of Ocracoke and Oregon Inlet. Almost all the turtles have been loggerheads, a threatened species. The ten-year average is only 219 loggerheads stranding in all of North Carolina in an entire year. Winds and currents helped bring the carcasses ashore in large numbers, but reports from fishermen indicate that many dead turtles are still at sea, so the actual extent of the turtle mortality offshore is much greater than the strandings would indicate.

Four of the loggerheads that stranded in May were entangled in gillnets with mesh sizes of 10 to 12 inches. NOAA Fisheries has determined that the most likely source of this sea turtle mortality is large-mesh gillnetting for monkfish and possibly dogfish. Other possible causes, such as disease, toxic algae, trauma, or hook fisheries, are not consistent with the nature of the strandings. Satellite sea surface temperature information has allowed NOAA Fisheries to reconstruct the likely times and locations of the sea turtle mortality. Gillnetting for dogfish and monkfish have been the active fisheries in those times and places. These fisheries have long soak times, ranging from overnight to several days. Large-mesh gillnets are known to be highly effective at catching turtles and in fact were the gear of choice during the historical sea turtle fishery.

Sea turtles are now migrating northward along the North Carolina coast into Virginia waters and Chesapeake Bay as these waters are rapidly warming. The turtles will likely still be concentrated on their migratory routes over the next weeks, until they disperse over their foraging grounds, and they will continue to be vulnerable to coastal and offshore large-mesh gillnet fisheries. NOAA Fisheries is issuing this temporary closure to reduce any further mortality of threatened and endangered sea turtles from large-mesh gillnets, after the already record-setting number of strandings.