

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Issues Emergency Rule to Protect Leatherback Sea Turtles in Waters off Florida's Northeast Coast *Shrimp Fishermen Required to Modify Trawls Today*

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has notified NOAA Fisheries that an extraordinarily high number of endangered leatherback sea turtles have stranded on northeast Florida beaches since October 28, 1999. From that date through November 29, fifteen leatherbacks washed ashore from Nassau through Brevard counties in shrimp zones 28, 29, and 30. Normally, three leatherback strandings occur in those zones during November. For the past ten years the total annual average leatherback strandings statewide has been 23. Some of the leatherback strandings may be attributable to their entanglement in shrimp trawls.

Leatherbacks are the world's largest species of sea turtle. Adults weigh between 600 and 1300 pounds and have carapaces (shells) five to six feet long. They are also the world's most wide-ranging sea turtle species, often migrating from the tropics to sub-Arctic waters to feed.

While only 45 to 50 female leatherbacks annually nest in Florida, they can be found in U. S. waters throughout the year. Their highest concentration off the southeast U. S. usually occurs during their northern springtime migration, especially when jellyfish are in high abundance. This year, however, leatherbacks are unusually abundant off Florida's east coast while fishermen are pursuing the fall white shrimp fishery.

Since strandings are only a minimum estimate of actual mortality, these 15 represent a serious blow to the local population. Therefore, to protect endangered leatherbacks from becoming incidentally captured in shrimp trawls, NOAA Fisheries has issued an emergency rule that will immediately require shrimp trawlers fishing off Florida's northeast coast to use modified turtle excluder devices (TEDs) in each net that is rigged for fishing.

This emergency rule is effective today and will expire at 11:59 p.m., EST January 7, 2000. The rule applies to shrimp trawlers operating in Atlantic offshore waters out to 10 nautical miles from the coast of Florida between 28° N. latitude and the Georgia-Florida border. Shrimp trawlers operating in the above geographic must use TEDs with escape openings large enough to exclude leatherback turtles.

NMFS gear specialists will be in the area to work with fishermen in making the required modifications. Complete installation instructions can be found at 50 CFR ☉223.207(a)(7)(ii)(B) or 223.207 (c)(1)(iv)(B). In addition, the specifications for the mandated modifications are available from the NOAA Fisheries' laboratory in Pascagoula, MS at 228-762-4591. That office's staff will mail or fax the specifications upon request. The hard TED and Parker soft TED specifications are posted under NR99-070 on the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional web site: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov/fishery/pannounc.gen/protann.99/newb999.htm>.

Additional sea turtle information at: http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res/turtles/turtle.html.