

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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FISHERIES SERVICE ANNOUNCES RESTRICTIONS TO PROTECT MIGRATORY LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLES OFF SOUTH CAROLINA AND NORTHERN GEORGIA

The National Marine Fisheries Service announces that all Atlantic Ocean and inshore waters, out to 10 nautical miles from shore, between 32 degrees north latitude (approximately Tybee Island, GA) and 33 degrees north latitude (approximately Cape Romain, SC) are closed to fishing by shrimp trawlers required to use Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), unless the TEDs are modified to allow very large leatherback sea turtles to escape. This is a 14-day closure to provide protection for leatherback sea turtles that are migrating along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. This closure is in effect through 11:59 p.m. on May 11, 2000.

Fishermen who wish to continue fishing in this closed area must ensure that their TEDs are modified to exclude leatherback turtles. These modifications can be made to standard, single-grid hard TEDs or to Parker soft TEDs. For instructions on making these modifications, please contact the NMFS Southeast Regional Office at the phone number above. For more specific assistance with making any gear modifications, please contact the NMFS Harvesting and Engineering Branch at 228-762-4591.

Through a final rule (60 FR 47713 September 14, 1995), NMFS established regulations to provide

protection for leatherback turtles when they occur in locally high densities during their annual, spring northward migration along the Atlantic seaboard. Within the Leatherback Conservation Zone, NMFS may close an area for 2 weeks when leatherback sightings exceed 10 animals per 50 nautical miles (nm) (92.6 km) during repeated aerial surveys pursuant to 50 CFR 223.206(d)(2)(iv)(A) through (C).

An aerial survey conducted on April 20, 2000 along the South Carolina coast documented 28 leatherback turtles over a total survey trackline of approximately 120 nautical miles (nm) (222 km). The highest concentrations were noted in waters off the southern half of the state. A replicate survey later in the same flight re-confirmed the high density of leatherbacks.

NMFS will continue to monitor the presence of leatherback sea turtles along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts. Continued high abundances of leatherbacks may require an extension or modification of this closure. Fishermen should monitor NOAA weather radio for announcements. They may also contact the NMFS Southeast Regional Office at the phone number above for updated information.