

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Imposes Emergency Rule to Protect Sea Turtles from Drowning in Shrimp Trawls in South Atlantic Waters *Emergency Rule Set to Expire after June 23*

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has imposed emergency restrictions that affect shrimpers operating in south Atlantic waters west of 77°57.5' W. longitude (approximately Cape Fear, N.C.) and 30° N. latitude (just north of St. Augustine, Fla.). Shrimpers trawling within that area are required, for 30 days, to use turtle excluder devices (TEDs) that are modified to have openings large enough for leatherback sea turtles to escape and are prohibited from fishing at night between one hour after sunset and one hour before sunrise. These restrictions are effective immediately and will expire at 12:01 a.m. June 24, 2002. They are necessary because excessive shrimping effort, particularly very long tows made at night, and the use of less efficient TEDs by some vessels are causing an extraordinarily high number of sea turtles deaths. This action is necessary to reduce mortality of sea turtles listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA).

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) has notified NOAA Fisheries that from May 5, 2002, through May 19, 2002, 90 dead sea turtles washed ashore on Georgia's beaches. Of these, 76 were loggerheads, ten were Kemp's ridleys, and four were leatherbacks. By comparison, over the previous 12 years for this two-week period, an average of 18 sea turtles stranded in Georgia. Whereas strandings are only a minimum indicator of actual mortality, these strandings represent a threat to the recovery and survival of the local sea turtle populations.

Information from GADNR and NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement indicates that there is an unusually high level of shrimping effort off Georgia this year. Unlike previous years, there are between 25 and 30 very large, powerful shrimp vessels from Gulf of Mexico states participating in the fishery. These vessels are capable of deploying more and larger trawl nets and can operate faster than the smaller local vessels. Although Georgia state waters are closed to shrimping, the fishery is currently being pursued in federal waters, targeting high-value, large white shrimp. Historically, local fishermen have targeted those shrimp during daylight hours using tow times of two to four hours and smaller nets, seventy percent of which are equipped with TEDs capable of excluding leatherbacks. The large, Gulf-based vessels are fishing 24-hours-a-day using tow times as long as 12 hours and towing larger nets equipped with smaller TED openings. The 24 hour fishing and long tow times represent a dramatic increase in effort off Georgia.

Furthermore, an aerial survey to monitor shrimping effort on May 21 found that most of the large trawlers were concentrated in waters off southern Georgia where most of the sea turtle

strandings have occurred. There is no evidence of a red tide or other harmful plankton bloom event or any major disease that could have contributed to the turtles' deaths. The condition of the stranded turtles indicates that they were healthy and actively foraging before they died, which is consistent with drowning in shrimp trawls.

Therefore, NOAA Fisheries has determined that continued capture and drowning of sea turtles during nighttime trawling and in nets with small-opening TEDs is unauthorized under the ESA and is implementing this rule.

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NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency conducts scientific research and provides services and products to support fisheries management, fisheries development, trade and industry assistance, enforcement, and protected species and habitat conservation programs.