

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

May 12, 2000
NR00-021

FISHERIES SERVICE REQUESTS SHRIMP TRAWLERS CONTINUE TO USE THE LEATHERBACK TED MODIFICATION OFFSHORE OF SOUTH CAROLINA AND NORTHERN GEORGIA

The 14-day closure in the area encompassed by 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) to provide protection for leatherback sea turtles that are migrating along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia expired at 11:59 p.m., May 11, 2000. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is requesting, however, that shrimp trawlers still use Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) that are modified to allow very large leatherback sea turtles to escape.

NMFS is making this request because an aerial survey conducted by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) on May 9, 2000 along the South Carolina coast documented more than 10 leatherback turtles over a survey trackline of less than 50 nautical miles (nm). A replicate survey will be conducted by the SCDNR within the week. If this survey shows more than 10 leatherbacks per 50 nm of survey trackline, NMFS will issue a new 14-day closure.

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).

NMFS has been monitoring leatherback numbers along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts during the current 14-day closure. Although leatherbacks are being sighted, they have not been sighted in numbers exceeding 10 per 50 nm of survey trackline until May 9, 2000 in southern South Carolina. Leatherback turtles are still in the area, and an additional closure may be required once the replicate survey is flown.

For assistance with making any gear modifications, please contact the NMFS Harvesting and Engineering Branch at 228-762-4591. NMFS gear specialists will also be visiting docks and net shops in coastal South Carolina to provide additional technical assistance.

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 additional closures. 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.