

Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Issues Emergency Rule to Protect Endangered and Threatened Sea Turtles in Pamlico Sound, North Carolina *Large Mesh Gillnet Fishery Closed*

NOAA Fisheries announces the closure of waters in Pamlico Sound, North Carolina to fishing with gillnets with a mesh size larger than 5 inches. The closed area includes all inshore waters of Pamlico Sound south of 35°23' N. latitude (approximately the end of Avon Channel) and east of 76°05' W. longitude (approximately Bluff Shoal). Fishermen have until 11:59 p.m. on December 12, 1999 to retrieve any gillnets larger than 5 inch mesh that are already set. This closure is in effect through January 9, 2000.

An unusually large number of sea turtles have stranded in Pamlico Sound since November 1, particularly in the vicinity of Hatteras and Ocracoke Inlets. The strandings through the week ending December 4 have totaled 74: 23 loggerheads, 12 green turtles, and 39 endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles. The strandings in North Carolina to date have already exceeded the historical level of annual sea turtle strandings by more than two times and, for Kemp's ridley turtles, by seven times.

Kemp's ridley turtles are the smallest and most critically endangered species of sea turtle in the Atlantic. They nest at only one main beach on the Gulf of Mexico but use the North Carolina sounds as an important summer feeding habitat. As the weather cools in the fall and winter, the sea turtles' migrations through and out of the North Carolina sounds make them extremely vulnerable to fishing effort that is concentrated at the inlets. Sea turtles must surface for air and can drown in a net in under an hour.

NOAA Fisheries has investigated the possible causes of the turtle deaths and determined that gillnetting with large mesh nets targeting southern flounder is the most likely cause. Aerial surveys documented gillnet vessels and many untended gillnets in the sound near the areas of highly concentrated turtle strandings. Necropsies of stranded animals indicate that they were healthy and had been foraging prior to their deaths. North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) observers documented 2 Kemp's ridley takes in only five trips aboard southern flounder gillnet vessels. NOAA fisheries law enforcement investigations have also confirmed that flounder gillnetting is the probable cause of most turtle deaths.

Approximately 30 to 40 boats participate in the southern flounder gillnet fishery, each setting from 2,000 to 10,000 yards (1 to 5 nautical miles) of large mesh gillnet. The mesh size used would be especially effective at entangling small turtles, like the Kemp's ridley. Nets are generally set and left untended for one or two days, although even longer sets occur. In addition, the fishery has grown rapidly in the last few years.

NOAA Fisheries believes this emergency action is necessary to prevent further mortality of endangered Kemp's ridley turtles. This closure will probably only affect the very end of the summer flounder season. NOAA Fisheries hopes to find a long-term solution to this problem through cooperation with NCDMF and the North Carolina fishermen prior to next year's season.