

**Remarks by Dr. Rebecca Lent, Deputy Director
National Marine Fisheries Service**

**Sea Turtle Press Conference
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We're about to get started. Do you want to take your seats? Happy New Year everybody, and thank you very much for coming this afternoon to hear the results of our exciting fishery gear research just completed in the Grand Banks off of Newfoundland.

The purpose of the gear research was twofold. First of all, to determine if and how we could avoid accidental capture of sea turtles in pelagic longline fisheries. Secondly, we wanted to engineer new devices that fishermen could use to disentangle and dehook turtles that are caught in longline fishing gear. We're here today to tell you that our research was successful. We want to share our results with you and with other fishing nations to promote the global conservation of sea turtles.

My name is Rebecca Lent. I'm the deputy director of NOAA Fisheries. That's part of NOAA in the Department of Commerce. Our mission is to ensure sustainable fisheries, and at the same time protection of species such as sea turtles and marine mammals. I'm going to give a brief background on the project, but first I want to introduce our partners who are here today. All of us will be available for one-on-one interviews following today's announcement.

Speaking today will be our director, Dr. Bill Hogarth. He will be followed by Nelson Beideman, the executive director of Bluewater Fisherman's Association. That is a group of longline fisherman in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. Gail Johnson, who is a member of Bluewater Fisherman's Association and co-owner of the fishing vessel, Seneca – which is on Gail's shirt, you'll see in a moment, and one of the 13 commercial longline vessels that were involved in this important experiment. Scott Burns, the director of – sorry, Scott – the marine programs at the World Wildlife Fund. World Wildlife is an organization that does a tremendous job promoting the conservation of sea turtles around the world.

Also with us today is Nils Stolpe from the Fisheries Research Institute; Shawn Dick and Kristin Raabe from Aquatic Release Conservation, a private industry partner that worked with us; and Glen Delany, our industry representative commissioner at ICCAT over the past nine years and a close collaborator on longline issues. We also have Sheryan Epperly and Charlie Bergmann from our Southeast Fisheries Science Center, who worked along with John Watson on this important research program. Charlie Bergmann participated in the workshops in Ecuador where we were able to share some of these results with about 800 fishermen.

Just a little bit of background as we get started. All six species of sea turtles are either threatened or endangered. We are required by law to minimize adverse human impacts on these sea turtle populations. We value these amazing, fascinating creatures and their existence, but sea turtle populations are on the decline worldwide. One of our jobs at NOAA Fisheries, as I mentioned, is promoting sustainable fisheries and also working on activities in the commercial fishing sector that interact with these sea turtles and contribute to the decline.

Over the past several years we've made a lot of progress in addressing sea turtle bycatch in the shrimp fishery in particular, with the turtle excluder devices, also known as TEDs. We recently

put new regulations for larger TEDs to be placed in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. These TEDs are devices that have an escape hatch so that when a shrimp trawler scoops up a turtle, the turtle can get out the escape trap.

But we also have a problem with sea turtle bycatch in our longline fisheries. We traditionally address this problem by placing restrictions on our fishing fleet such as time/area closures, extensive closures. In the Western Pacific off of Hawaii we basically shut down the directed swordfish fishery, and in the Northeast Atlantic we shut down the Northeast distant fishing grounds, which is where this fishing experiment was conducted. But because U.S. longliners only account for about 6 percent of the pelagic longline efforts worldwide, closures such as those in the Northeast distant had a limited impact on sea turtles, in reducing sea turtle bycatch. Other nations continued their fishing, were free to expand, and quite possibly have a higher amount of turtle bycatch. In some cases, these are seafood products that we import in the United States.

So we launched this project in 2001 to look at ways that longline fishermen could avoid interactions with sea turtles, and where there were interactions, that we could have better methods for safe handling – dehooking, disentangling – and therefore improving the survival rate of sea turtles that are released alive.

Throughout this three-year experiment, we have forged unprecedented partnerships with private industry and with World Wildlife Fund, private sector environmental groups, and in some cases our international counterparts, in what we think is an important step in the future of addressing sea turtle bycatch in all of the pelagic longline fisheries.

Thank you for your attention, and now I'd like to ask Dr. Bill Hogarth to come up and address the group. Again, Bill is the director of the National Marine Fisheries Service.