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**NOAA, INDUSTRY DEVELOP TECHNOLOGY THAT SAVES SEA TURTLES;
U.S. CALLS ON OTHER FISHING NATIONS TO JOIN EFFORT**
Turtle-friendly Gear and Techniques Reduce Interactions up to 90 Percent

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced today it has developed new technology to help fishermen reduce accidental capture and harm to endangered sea turtles. NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), in cooperation with fishermen and private industry, has completed three years of fishing-equipment research in the high seas of the Atlantic Ocean to develop turtle-friendly gear and fishing methods for commercial longline vessels. NOAA is an agency of the Department of Commerce.

"The results of this study have global implications for all nations with longline fishing fleets," said Dr. William Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries. "Our cooperative research with industry has shown that these turtle bycatch-reduction techniques have been successfully tested in the Grand Banks and are a viable solution for meeting everyone's objectives. I'm asking all nations to match our efforts and evaluate these techniques in their fisheries so we can meet our shared responsibility to protect sea turtles and allow commercial fishing to prosper."

The agency and partners have concluded that encounters with leatherback and loggerhead turtles can be reduced by 65 to 90 percent by switching the type of hook and bait from the traditional "J"- style hook with squid to a large circle style hook with mackerel.

"These new approaches we are announcing today are the answer we've all been waiting for," said Nelson Beideman, Executive Director of Bluewater Fisherman's Association, a commercial longline group with 13 vessels participating in the project. "We are pleased to announce to the fishing world that we have successfully documented practical ways for pelagic longline fishermen to overwhelmingly reduce sea turtle interactions and also to substantially reduce harm from any remaining sea turtle interactions."

For the turtles that are incidentally captured, government scientists and partners have developed new de-hooking and release techniques to increase survival rates. Dehookers and dipnets allow fishermen to remove hooks from turtles with minimal additional trauma. A device used as a turtle elevator, the "leatherback lift," was crafted to allow fishermen to bring larger turtles on board for de-hooking.

Results of the study have received the endorsement of fishermen and environmentalists, such as the World Wildlife Fund.

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"World Wildlife Fund applauds the efforts of NOAA Fisheries and the Blue Water Fishermen to develop techniques for saving sea turtles from drowning in longline gear," said Scott Burns, director of WWF's Marine Conservation Program. "We are joining NOAA and Blue Water to advance these methods internationally so that we can not only stop unnecessary killing of these endangered animals but provide economic incentives for fishermen in the process."

There is economic incentive for fishermen to use sea turtle bycatch reduction techniques. They are now able to retrieve their hooks and other gear, avoid the extra time spent on entangled turtles, and with the significant bycatch reduction achieved, the pelagic longline industry may have fewer bycatch-related restrictions. Further, tests showed the use of these techniques can increase directed catch by as much as 30 percent.

The need for research into these new practices became apparent when the U.S. prohibited American longliners from operating in the Grand Banks off Newfoundland due to bycatch of endangered sea turtles, leaving these productive swordfish grounds open to increased fishing effort by other nations. Though the foreign vessels are not equipped with turtle bycatch reduction technology, the United States imports their seafood products. Hogarth said American longline fleets pay a high price when shut out of turtle-prone fishing grounds, and the move does not ensure protection of sea turtles if U.S. effort is replaced by other fleets.

NOAA Fisheries has begun international outreach efforts to share the results of this experiment with other fishing nations. In 2003, the agency partnered with the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission to conduct training workshops for sea turtle bycatch reduction, attended by over 800 fishermen throughout Ecuador. The agency will participate in similar workshops in Costa Rica this spring.

Commercial longliners catch some of America's most popular seafood: tuna, swordfish and mahi mahi. The fishing technique has long been controversial because of the level of incidental bycatch. The U.S. Atlantic pelagic longline fleet is a \$40 million-per-year industry, and accounts for a fraction of the total sea turtle catches in all the world's fisheries.

For more information about this project, visit us online at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/mediacenter/turtles.

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NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit www.noaa.gov.