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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Agency weighs use of longline fishing that could snag sea turtles

by JANE KAY
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The 60-mile-long fishing lines that can snag endangered leatherback sea turtles would be allowed off the California coast for the first time, under a decision being weighed by a federal agency.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has proposed giving the Ocean Pacific Seafood Co. a short-term permit to use longlines for catching swordfish 40 miles off the coast from Santa Barbara north into Oregon.

Environmental groups fear that if the permit is granted, the federal government would be opening the way for more longline fishing, a method that has been prohibited along the California coast and out 200 miles.

The groups argue that the hooked lines floating near the surface will injure and kill sea turtles and also entangle marine mammals. The hooks indiscriminately snare big fish, including some that are controlled by fishing quotas and others that are not marketable, they say.

On Friday, the state Coastal Commission will vote on whether the proposed permit is consistent with the California Coastal Act, which protects ocean resources.

This week, Pacific leatherback turtles - giant creatures that weigh up to 2,000 pounds and trace their ancestry back 125 million years - have started showing up off the Farallon Islands after swimming thousands of miles from nesting grounds on the island of New Guinea. They feed along the way on jellyfish, squid and small fishes.

The number of adult female Pacific leatherbacks fell from 91,000 in 1980 to 3,000 in 2000. More recent counts put the upper range at 5,000. The drop is blamed on destruction of turtles and eggs on nesting beaches and entanglement in fishing gear.

An estimated 170 turtles come to California every year between July and December, clustering around the Farallones and Monterey Bay. The ones that nest on the beaches of Mexico and Costa Rica go to the Galapagos Islands to forage.

Four environmental groups - the Turtle Island Restoration Network, Center for Biological Diversity, Ocean Conservancy and Oceana - oppose the permit, saying the leatherback population faces extinction.

Instead of using longlines, fishermen should harpoon swordfish, a method that is working for some in California, the groups argue.

The fisheries service in June proposed

issuing the permit. The week before, the agency had turned down a request by commercial fishermen to use drift gillnets in California waters, citing the threat that the technique poses to the sea turtles.

Pete Dupuy, owner of Ocean Pacific Seafood in Tarzana (Los Angeles County), said Monday that he is encouraged by the positive response from the fisheries service to his request. He applied under a part of the law that allows experiments, in this case testing whether longline swordfishing is economically feasible for fishermen.

Dupuy, a fisherman for 40 years, harpooned swordfish until the early 1980s. Now he wouldn't make enough money at it, he said. "You couldn't catch enough fish with a harpoon to pay for the fuel."

Using longlines, however, can be expensive. Over the four months of the proposed permit, the fishermen could use 56,000 hooks that cost \$1 each, said Chuck Janisse, a lobbyist for the Federation of Independent Seafood Harvesters, or FISH. That's why it's useful to study the use of longlines under a short-term permit, he said.

Drift gillnetting is losing favor because of the threats to marine mammals, so fishermen are looking ahead to switching to longlining,

Janisse said. The fisheries service recognizes the trend, and is interested in allowing the test, he said.

Under state law, floating longlines have been banned for at least 30 years. In 2004, when the federal government took over management of the swordfish fishery, the prohibition was extended to U.S.-flagged vessels even beyond 200 miles.

In early July, the Center for Biological Diversity sent a letter to the California Coastal Commission asking for the state review. The group is urging the commission to turn down the permit, said attorney Brendan Cummings.

“We shouldn’t be killing endangered species to prove what we already know. What we will learn from this experiment is that longlines kill leatherbacks in California, too,” Cummings said.

Since the 1950s, longline fishing has become common in 40 nations, involving 100,000 miles of line and 1.4 billion hooks a year. There are 4,000 longline boats in the Pacific alone, one-third from Japan and

Taiwan. It’s the predominant method of catching swordfish.

The bycatch with longline has been well-documented. In observations in Hawaii, the hooks and line caught species of dolphins and whales.

A study in the Atlantic found that every year boats were catching about 800 leatherbacks and 1,000 loggerhead turtles. Ocean experts estimate that up to half die.

Carl Safina, a MacArthur Fellow who wrote “Voyage of the Turtle,” said in an interview Tuesday that longlining in the Atlantic showed that fishermen would catch more fish and earn more money. But the fishing method also hurt sea turtles and depleted stocks of the big fish, including swordfish, marlin, tunas and sharks, he said.

Online resources

Read the Coastal Commission agenda and reports on the proposed fishing permit:

links.sfgate.com/ZOO

How to help the turtles

Here are some ways you can help reduce the threats to leatherback turtles:

-- Don’t throw plastic bags and balloons on beaches or streets. They can end up in the ocean, where they look like jellyfish to the turtles.

-- In restaurants and fish markets, ask for swordfish that is caught by harpoon, which only targets the swordfish, instead of longline, which hooks other sea animals and can entangle the turtles.

-- Buy seafood that is caught in a sustainable manner. Avoid large fish such as tuna, shark and swordfish, which are generally caught by fishing methods that can hurt sea turtles.

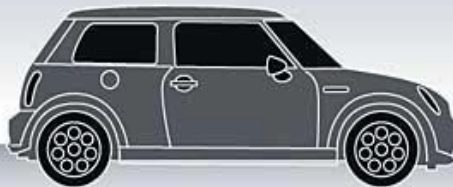
-- If you visit Mexico or other countries where sea turtles nest, don’t bother the turtles.

Source: Turtle Island Restoration Network

The leatherback turtle



Leatherback turtle: Up to 9 feet, 2,000 pounds



Mini Cooper: 11.9 feet, 2,524 pounds

Scientific name: Dermochelys coriacea

Size: Leatherbacks are the largest turtles. They can grow to 9 feet and weigh more than a ton.

Description: Adults are usually black with a pinkish, white belly and pink and white spots on the top of their head. Their front flippers are larger than other sea turtles' and lack claws.

Range: Leatherbacks are found around the globe, although the Pacific populations are found in Asia and along the coastline of North and South America. They're very migratory animals. They can stay underwater for 30 minutes and dive up to 4,000 feet.

Diet: They favor jellyfish but also feed on sea urchins, squid, algae and seaweed. Their throats have spines that prevent prey from escaping.

Reproduction: Only an estimated 2,300 reproducing Pacific females remain. They lay about 100 eggs on sandy, tropical beaches. The nesting period may last between one and two weeks. Two-inch hatchlings emerge after about two months.

Threats: Nesting sites are increasingly destroyed by pollution and development. Longline fishing — which employs 60-mile lines of baited hooks — and drift gill net fishing also ensnare the turtles. They were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1970.

Sources: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Mongabay; MiniUSA.com — compiled by Johnny Miller, Chronicle Research Librarian