

ENDANGERED SPECIES: Settlement may expand protection for sea turtles (10/08/2009)

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The Obama administration will speed up its reviews of new protection measures for sea turtles under a settlement with environmental groups announced today.

The deal requires the National Marine Fisheries Service to decide by December whether to designate special habitat protections for Pacific leatherback turtles and by February whether to change the status of loggerhead turtles in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans from "threatened" to "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Leatherbacks are listed as endangered but have not had a critical habitat designated.

If the service finds new protections are warranted, it could impose new fisheries regulations, set speed limits for ships and restrict human use of turtle nesting beaches, said Dave Allison, senior sea turtle campaign director for Oceana, an advocacy group that with the Center for Biological Diversity and the Turtle Island Restoration Network had petitioned and then sued for federal action on the turtle proposals.

The Gulf of Mexico longline fishery has been closed since April because federal data suggest fishing lines there are hooking and drowning many loggerhead turtles. Regional fishery officials voted to impose new restrictions in August and are expected to reopen the fishery on a limited basis later this month ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 14).

The environmental groups' lawsuit accused the fisheries service of missing its 12-month deadline to respond to the petition that sought action on turtle protection.

The groups say the service's own data show the turtles need expanded protection. A federal status review released last month determined that loggerheads in both oceans are "currently at risk of extinction."

"'Currently at risk of extinction' and 'endangered' are one and the same," said Eric Bilsky, assistant general counsel and senior litigator at Oceana. "Strong protections must be established as soon as possible if these sea turtle populations are to have any chance of recovery."

NMFS said the August evaluation would not determine its response to the petitions.

"Risk of extinction is one way of evaluating the status of a particular species," said NMFS spokeswoman Connie Barclay. "It does not directly translate to a listing category ... endangered or threatened."

Sea turtles have been on the decline worldwide, and recent data from the state of Florida showed a sharp decline in nesting in 2008. Nesting levels in Florida -- home to what is thought to be the world's second-largest loggerhead nesting ground behind Oman -- have fallen 40 percent in the past decade, Oceana said.

Leatherback turtles migrate every year from Indonesian beaches to feed on jellyfish off the northern Pacific coast.