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Feds Consider 'Critical Habitat' for Leatherback Turtles

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NOAA Fisheries officials said Thursday they will make a decision whether to go forward by Dec. 4 under terms of a settlement of a lawsuit brought by conservation groups.

The groups had sued the government for failing to follow through on their petition to designate critical habitat.

Pacific leatherbacks migrate each year from nesting areas in Indonesia to feed on jellyfish in the California current between Lincoln City, Ore., and Point Conception, Calif.

Conservation groups have proposed designating that broad swath of ocean as critical habitat to encompass feeding areas as well as migration routes, said Ben Enticknap of the group Oceana.

If critical habitat is designated, it would require federal agencies to consult with NOAA Fisheries before going ahead with projects or actions in the area that might harm the turtles.

Issues to be considered include development of offshore wind and wave energy, coastal power plants, and pollution from agricultural runoff, said David Cottingham, chief of sea turtle conservation for NOAA Fisheries.

Because leatherbacks were listed before the 1988 amendments to the Endangered Species Act requiring critical habitat designations, the agency was under no legal obligation to designate it, as it must with other species, said Barbara Schroeder, national sea turtle coordinator for NOAA Fisheries.

As part of the settlement, the agency also agreed to a Feb. 19 deadline to decide whether populations of loggerhead sea turtles in the northern Pacific and northwestern Atlantic should be listed as endangered rather than threatened.

The groups Oceana, Center for Biological Diversity, and Turtle Island Restoration Network brought the lawsuit.

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