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Feds Take Step Toward Protecting Turtles

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The Associated Press

HONOLULU -- The federal government is considering listing loggerhead sea turtles that live along California's coast and off Hawaii as an endangered species and further protecting their habitat.

Loggerhead turtles everywhere are already classified as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act, but environmentalists say a higher level of protection is needed.

The decision by the National Marine Fisheries Service to consider an upgraded definition for North Pacific loggerheads was published Friday in the Federal Registry.

A day earlier, two East Coast environmental groups petitioned the Interior Department and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration to take a similar step with another variety of loggerhead sea turtles along the Atlantic Coast. Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service both have jurisdiction over the Endangered Species Act.

No action has been announced on that petition, which would declare the Western Atlantic Sea Turtle a subspecies. Environmentalists have used the federal act to protect specific threatened groups within the same species.

It's uncertain how many loggerheads there are, but advocates say tens of thousands are killed annually by commercial fishing and coastal development on both U.S. coasts.

Pacific fisheries managers, however, say great strides have been made in protecting

Pacific loggerheads in recent years, both in the Pacific and on Japanese beaches where they nest. Besides California and Hawaii, the turtles also migrate to Mexico.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Turtle Island Restoration Network, which seek to increase turtle protection worldwide, petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service in July to consider the upgraded designation for Pacific loggerheads. The Federal Registry publication calls for public comments by Jan. 15.

The petitioners estimate loggerheads have declined by more than 80 percent, with fewer than 1,000 female loggerheads returning to nest each year.

"The survival of loggerheads will depend on preventing sea turtles from drowning in fishing gear," said Miyoko Sakashita, ocean program attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The decision to consider listing the loggerheads as endangered marks a first step toward heightened protections in the Pacific."

Eric Kingma, an environmental coordinator for the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, which oversees Pacific island fisheries from Honolulu, said he was "somewhat surprised" by the move because a five-year review of loggerheads was recently completed.

"We have significantly reduced sea turtle interactions in our fishery," Kingma said, adding that most of the destruction of sea turtles is off the coast of Mexico, where thousands of loggerheads have died.

Environmental groups have been working for years to grant special protection to



Research biologists and aquarian technicians lift one of three 250-pound loggerhead sea turtles to a boat that will release the 30-year-old turtles into the Pacific Ocean off San Diego, Sunday, Oct. 1, 2000. In a move that has surprised some fisheries experts, the federal government Friday Nov. 16, 2007 has decided to consider listing North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles as a separate endangered species and setting aside areas along the California coast and off Hawaii as their critical habitat. (AP Photo/Bob Grieser)

the loggerheads. They blame longline fishing, which uses hook-laden fish lines as long as 60 miles through areas where the turtles swim. The target is swordfish or tuna, but thousands of turtles, seabirds, marine animals and sharks are snagged by the lines.

Turtles also are threatened by global warming, according to the environmental groups, with coastal erosion from rising seas threatening nesting beaches and skewing the ratio of females and males. More females hatch when temperatures increase, they say.