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Gulf's longline fishing fleet could be cut in half under proposal to protect sea turtles

By Eric Staats

NAPLES — The commercial longline fishing fleet in the Gulf of Mexico would be cut in half under rules proposed Thursday to protect sea turtles.

Environmental groups called the rules a victory that also protects Florida's fishing communities, but fishing industry advocates said the rules went too far.

The vote by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, meeting in Alabama, capped months of wrangling over how to reduce the number of sea turtles getting hooked by longliners on the hunt for reef fish species such as grouper and snapper.

The rules go next to the Commerce Department for review. An approval could take six months.

In the meantime, an emergency rule in place since May to keep longliners out of sea turtle foraging grounds off Florida's west coast remains in place.

Under the new rules approved Thursday, longliners would have to have a record of catching at least 40,000 pounds of reef fish annually to stay in the longline fishery.

About 60 of the 125 longline fishing boats with reef fish permits in the Gulf of Mexico would qualify under the 40,000-pound threshold, according to federal figures.

Others would either have to stop fishing or move to other gear types, such as vertical lines.

Boats that remain in the fishery would be prohibited from fishing in waters shallower than 35 fathoms, about 210 feet, between June and August and could have no more than 750 hooks rigged for fishing.

The emergency rule restricts longliners to waters deeper than 50 fathoms.

Longliners' impact on sea turtle populations does not justify a crackdown on the industry, Southeastern Fishing Association Executive Director Bob Jones said.

"The numbers just aren't there, but we're on the nasty end of the stick," he said.

He compared the Gulf Council's actions to requiring farmers to go back to the days of using horses and plows to grow food.

Other more restrictive alternatives were on the table Thursday, but the Gulf Council proposal sticks to middle ground that still gives turtles the protection required under federal laws, environmental groups said.

"I think that is a really good place for us all to be," said Vicki Cornish, director of marine wildlife policy at The Ocean Conservancy.

Between June 2006 and December 2007, longline fishing boats caught more than 900 sea turtles, almost 800 of them loggerheads, according to a NOAA study using observers aboard commercial fishing boats. More than 300 of the turtles were dead.

NOAA issued a report this week that



Photo by GREG KAHN

Markus Hennig, an environmental specialist with Collier County Parks and Recreation, measures the depth and width of a sea turtle nest at Vanderbilt Beach in North Naples on August 6, 2009.

Greg Kahn/Staff

showed the Northwest Atlantic Ocean population of loggerhead sea turtles, which includes the Gulf, is in decline and at risk of extinction.

Environmental groups are calling on NOAA to change the loggerhead's status under the Endangered Species Act from threatened to endangered.

A preliminary count of sea turtle nests from the state of Florida shows the 2009 nesting season to be one of the worst on record.

In Collier County, for example, where mostly loggerheads nest, turtle monitors have counted 550 nests so far this year. Nesting season winds down in August.

During the 1998 nesting season, between May and October, monitors counted 1,100 sea turtle nests in Collier County.

Follow environment reporter Eric Staats at twitter.com/ndn_estaats.