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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Conservation groups sue for sea turtle protection

- Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer

- Conservation groups sued the Obama administration Tuesday over the fate of the endangered leatherback sea turtle, accusing federal officials of ignoring a legal deadline to protect a huge expanse of Pacific coastal waters as critical habitat for the reptiles.

The National Marine Fisheries Service settled an earlier lawsuit by proposing in January 2010 to designate 70,600 square miles of offshore waters, from Southern California to northern Washington, as a safety zone for the leatherbacks and the jellyfish they consume, the groups said in U.S. District Court in San Francisco.

The agency was required to publish a final rule a year later but failed to do so, the suit said.

Leatherbacks are the largest sea turtles, growing up to 8 feet long and weighing as much as a ton. They also have the longest migration, 12,000 miles each summer and fall from nesting grounds in Indonesia to the West Coast of the United States.

They were placed on the endangered species list in 1970, but their numbers have continued to plummet because of accidental deaths



Alejandro Fallabrino

A leatherback turtle off the coast of Northern California

caused by commercial fishing operations as well as water pollution, according to government reports. Conservation groups said the Pacific population has declined more than 95 percent since 1980, with only 2,000 adult females remaining.

“These magnificent sea turtles desperately need protected habitat to swim and forage without encountering life-threatening fishing gear, plastic and pollution,” said attorney Catherine Kilduff of the Center for Biological Diversity, a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Government spokeswoman Christine Patrick said the fisheries service has been in close communication with interested groups over the past few months and is “very close to a final rule designating critical habitat for leatherbacks.”

Conservationists have heard those assurances before, said Todd Steiner, executive director of the Turtle Island Restoration Network, another plaintiff organization.

“We need action to save these turtles,” he said. “So far, what we’ve basically gotten is a runaround. If it takes legal action to move this up their agenda and make it a higher priority, that’s what we’ve had to do.”

The suit asks a federal judge to set a mandatory date for a final designation of protected habitat.