



ENDANGERED SPECIES: New protected habitat for leatherback sea turtles announced

E&E reporter

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The Obama administration announced new protections yesterday for critical habitat of the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle.

The new protections could cover 70,600 square miles of Pacific waters off the coast of California, Oregon and Washington that are home to the turtles and their food source, jellyfish. A final plan that will specify the size of the protected area is due Nov. 15.

The announcement comes after plaintiffs from the Center for Biological Diversity and other conservation groups filed suit against the government, accusing it of failing to meet the terms of a previous legal settlement that set a January 2011 deadline for the creation of the protected habitat.

Leatherback supporters have complained that while the plan is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough in protecting the turtles. Teri Shore, program director of Turtle Island Restoration Network, said the plan needs to include waters farther off the Pacific Coast where certain fishing practices still endanger the turtles.

At up to 8 feet long and often weighing around 1 ton, the leatherback is by far the largest sea turtle. Its migration pattern between nesting grounds in Indonesia and the United States also gives it the longest migration. The species has been considered endangered since 1970, but numbers of leatherbacks have continued to decline, dropping by as much as 95 percent since 1980 according to some groups