



# Enviro Groups, US Settle Turtle Protection Suit

By Richard Vanderford

New York (July 5, 2011) -- Environmental groups and the National Marine Fisheries Service on Tuesday settled a California federal lawsuit aimed at forcing the government to finalize a plan to create a Pacific coast protected area for the endangered leatherback sea turtle.

"Plaintiffs and defendants agree that settlement of this action in this manner is in the public interest and is an appropriate way to resolve the dispute between them," the two sides said in a court filing. The government will have until Nov. 15 to come up with a final version of the proposed plan, they said.

Environmental groups led by the Center for Biological Diversity have since October 2007 pushed the federal government to create a plan to carve out a protected area off the coasts of California, Washington and Oregon for the leatherbacks, which are threatened by commercial fishing and whose numbers have declined 90 percent over the last 30 years, the groups claimed.

The government began the process of creating a protected area in December 2007, but had consistently failed to finalize the plan despite mandatory deadlines in the Endangered Species Act, according to the settlement.

The groups sued in April after the last round of delays, saying the government's foot-dragging was illegal.

Although the sea turtles were protected under the ESA, the failure of the government to designate a critical habitat off the coast "significantly diminishes their chances for survival and recovery," the groups said.

Leatherback sea turtles are the largest sea turtles, weighing between 700 and 2,000 pounds when fully grown, according to the complaint. The turtles migrate between Japan, Indonesia and the Pacific coast of the U.S., eating up to a third of their body weight each day in jellyfish to survive.

Longline and gillnet fishing has killed the vast majority of leatherbacks in the past 30 years, but the turtles also face threats from climate change and ocean acidification, according to the groups.

Scientists have predicted that the Pacific leatherback may become extinct within decades if steps are not taken to protect them.

"The settlement filed today forces the National Marine Fisheries Service to make a long-overdue decision about protecting Pacific leatherbacks when they are in our waters," said Susan Murray, a director at Oceana, one of the groups that brought the suit.

"Endangered turtles face too many threats around the world. The U.S. needs to set the example of responsible stewardship for this iconic species when they are on our watch," Murray said.

A spokesman for the government declined to comment.

The environmental groups are represented by Catherine W. Kilduff and Miyoko Sakashita of the Center for Biological Diversity.

The case is Center for Biological Diversity et al. v. Locke et al., case number 3:11-cv-01870, in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California.

--Editing by Eydie Cubarrubia