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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Turtle protection device plans shelved by NOAA

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — New regulations that would have forced shrimpers in the bays and marshes of the Gulf of Mexico to install devices on their nets to save endangered sea turtles were scrapped Tuesday by federal officials.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said it is withdrawing plans by its fisheries service to require “turtle excluder devices” for small fishing operations that trawl for shrimp in state waters.

NOAA said data collected over the summer showed the devices — which are escape hatches for sea turtles on nets — may not keep small turtles from being caught in the shallower waters that would have been subject to the requirement.

“The information we now have suggests the conservation benefit does not justify the burden this rule would place on the industry. We need more research looking at different options,” Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries, said in a statement.

The rules had been set to take effect by spring. Gulf of Mexico shrimpers had said the requirement

could push them out of business. The change would have affected 2,600 fishermen, including an estimated 2,300 vessels in Louisiana.

Crabtree said federal officials will continue their research to help prevent turtle deaths.

“We’re not abandoning this issue. There’s just more work that needs to be done to get it right,” he said.

A spike in turtle deaths in the Gulf since 2010, environmental lawsuits, the BP PLC oil spill and the endangered status of sea turtles have spurred federal officials to look at stronger protections for vulnerable turtle populations.

In the past two years, more than 1,100 dead sea turtles have been found in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama waters. Federal scientists estimate about 28,000 sea turtles are caught each year in nets.

The Center for Biological Diversity, a national conservation group that sought the protections, criticized the decision to shelve the proposed federal rules, saying further delay will cause unnecessary turtle deaths.

“The agency’s failure to protect these species is tragic. Despite its own claim that the Fisheries Service is not abandoning its promise to protect sea turtles, it

is in fact maintaining the deadly status quo by failing to move forward with any protective measures,” said Jaclyn Lopez, a lawyer for the center.

Turtle excluder devices have been required for larger shrimp vessels that work in federal waters for more than two decades, according to NOAA, but not in state waters, with shallower areas and smaller turtles.

Instead of the devices, fishermen in state waters are supposed to lift their nets out of the water every once in a while to help trapped turtles breathe and get out of nets. NOAA officials said they’ve had trouble with low compliance and difficulties in enforcement.

The proposed rules targeted three common types of nets called skimmer trawls, pusher-head trawls and wing net trawls. Other states that would have been included in the rules, according to NOAA spokeswoman Allison Garrett, were Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina and Florida.

Fishermen have long resisted moves to force the turtle-saving gear on the fleet. Shrimpers said there was little evidence that they were responsible for the spike in sea turtle deaths and said the cost of the new rules could destroy the industry.