



Obama admin shelves plan for requiring turtle protection devices

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Turtle excluder devices are ineffective in certain types of near-shore shrimp trawls and will not be required after all, federal fisheries officials announced today.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is withdrawing its proposal to require turtle excluder devices (TEDs) in skimmer trawls after researchers found they don't save juvenile turtles.

A TED is a large grate with metal bars spaced 4 inches apart placed in a fishing net. Shrimp and other fish pass through the grate and are collected in the net, but when a turtle hits the bars, it is able to escape the net through a trap door.

TEDs have been required in otter trawls, which operate in both deep and shallow water, for more than 20 years and are considered very effective.

However, NMFS observers deployed on skimmer trawls -- which work in very shallow water 3 to 15 feet deep -- discovered they are more likely to encounter juvenile turtles, and the smaller animals pass through the bars into the net, where they could drown if they run out of air.

NMFS observers monitored 796 tows this year, during which 24 endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles were caught, said Bob Hoffman, the endangered species branch chief for the NMFS Southeast region. More than half were small enough to fit through the bars. (All the turtles were rescued and set free, though one is presumed to have died, officials said.)

Managers concluded they could not justify requiring 2,600 shrimp fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean to add TEDs to their skimmer trawls.

"It would cost shrimp fishermen a lot of money for very little ecological benefits to the turtles," Hoffman said.

However, the agency plans to develop and test devices that would work for smaller turtles, Hoffman said.

Fisheries managers also plan to increase outreach and enforcement on tow time limits, which require fishermen to pull in their equipment every 55 minutes or 75 minutes so any captured turtles are set free before they drown. Most turtles can survive for an hour underwater.

"We found a lot of [fishermen] didn't even know there was such a thing as tow time restrictions," Hoffman said.

John Williams, executive director of the Southern Shrimp Alliance, applauded NMFS for taking a “common-sense” approach to crafting regulations.

One device costs \$300 to \$600, and each skimmer trawl would likely need four to six devices, he estimated.

He said his group has worked on improving the devices in otter trawls and would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with NMFS to develop more appropriate devices for skimmer trawls.

Environmentalists expressed disappointment with the decision.

“The agency’s failure to protect these species is tragic,” Jaclyn Lopez, staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. “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.”