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Endangered turtle gains protections off West Coast

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LOS ANGELES —

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Leatherbacks feed on jellyfish in these waters after swimming thousands of miles across the ocean from nesting grounds in Indonesia, Australia and Mexico.

The protections, expected to go into effect Feb. 25, would require federal projects that could change or destroy the habitat in the designated area to undergo further review. Private activities, like recreation, wouldn't be affected.

The leatherback sea turtle is the largest marine turtle in the world, weighing up to 2,000 pounds and stretching 8 feet long. The turtle population

has been vulnerable to boat strikes, disease and a high level of predation and has been listed as endangered since 1970.

"It's something we've been working on the past couple of years," said Sara McNulty, an ecologist with the fisheries service. "The agency is very happy."

The agency began looking into expanding the critical habitat area for the tortoise after receiving an Endangered Species Act petition from several environmental groups. Another protected area exists in the Caribbean at the western end of the island of St. Croix and in Atlantic coastal waters.

The new area is made up of two sections, with the southern portion stretching along the California coast from Point Arena to Point Arguello. The northern portion goes from Cape Flattery in Washington to Cape Blanco in Oregon.

Some, however, believe the habitat area should be nearly twice as large and also protect the leatherbacks' migratory route from commercial

fishing and marine vessel traffic. The groups that filed the petition in 2007, including the Center for Biological Diversity, sued the fisheries service over the matter in 2009 after the agency missed a deadline.

"Habitat protections are vital to the survival of leatherbacks but this rule falls short of the goal," said Catherine Kilduff, with the center. "Sea turtles will continue to swim a gauntlet to get to the best feeding areas off our coast, dodging ship traffic, long nets and hooks."

Still, some also believe this is a step in the right direction for the turtles, whose population has been struggling for some time. In 1982, there were about 115,000 adult female leatherbacks in the world. Just 14 years later, studies found that number had dropped to about 34,500.

"Leatherbacks finally have a safe haven along our coast, but still face extinction due to growing threats from fisheries, pollution and ship strikes," said Teri Shore, program director at Turtle Island Restoration Network.