



ENDANGERED SPECIES:

NMFS proposes 'critical habitat' in Gulf, Atlantic for loggerhead turtles

Laura Petersen, E&E reporter
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The National Marine Fisheries Service proposed habitat protections yesterday for loggerhead sea turtles in the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

The proposal includes 36 breeding and migration areas off North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi.

“When developing this proposal, NOAA Fisheries carefully examined a number of factors, including the unique biology and life history needs of the species as well as economic impacts,” said Sam Rauch, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s acting assistant administrator for fisheries.

Three environmental groups -- Oceana, the Center for Biological Diversity and Turtle Island Restoration Network -- sued NMFS last year to force the agency to designate “critical habitat” for the threatened sea turtle. The service had never designated in-water habitat since listing the species under the Endangered Species Act in 1978, or since splitting the population into nine distinct groups in 2011.

The groups welcomed the proposal but said it misses important areas farther north in the Atlantic and known feeding areas in the Gulf.

“Loggerheads migrate thousands of miles, facing giant shrimp trawls, hundreds of plastic bags, speeding yachts, fishing lines and even oil rigs, all obstacles jeopardizing their ability to feed and swim to shore to lay eggs,” said Amanda Keledjian, an Oceana scientist. “Protecting turtles as they swim to their nesting and feeding areas is essential for rebuilding populations.”

Critical habitat does not automatically prohibit activities, but any federally permitted activities must show they will not harm the species.

No critical habitat was identified for the endangered Pacific Ocean population because there was too little area under U.S. jurisdiction that met the criteria, NMFS said.

This proposal complements the onshore critical habitat proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service last year to protect 739 miles of loggerhead nesting beaches (Greenwire, March 22).

Public comments on the proposal will be accepted until Sept. 16.

