

Feds look to protect loggerhead turtles' ocean habitats



One of the live loggerhead sea turtles found in a nest inventory at South Carolina's Myrtle Beach State Park makes its way to the Atlantic Ocean on September 7, 2012

By Erika Bolstad — McClatchy Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON — The federal government moved Wednesday to protect the ocean habitat of loggerhead turtles, listed since 1978 in some places as an endangered species because of threats from pollution, injury caused by fishing gear and loss of nesting beaches.

The draft proposal from the National Marine Fisheries Service would put in place critical habitat protections in waters offshore of Southeastern nesting beaches, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi.

Such plans are designed to aid recovery of the species. They include a full analysis of economic impact,

said Sam Rauch, the acting assistant administrator for fisheries for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The agency "carefully examined a number of factors, including the unique biology and life history needs of the species as well as economic impacts," Rauch said in a statement.

The environmental groups that pressed for the restrictions say the protections don't go far enough, because loggerheads regularly travel as far north as Massachusetts. Turtle watchers say the rules also fail to protect areas on both east and west coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico, where the loggerheads are known to feed.

The habitat designation was prompted by a 2007 legal petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, the Turtle Island Restoration Network and Oceana.

"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, a marine scientist at Oceana. "Protecting turtles as

they swim to their nesting and feeding areas is essential for rebuilding populations."

The critical habitat proposal includes some nearshore reproductive habitat, such as areas directly off nesting and hatching beaches from North Carolina through Mississippi. It also includes winter habitat in North Carolina, breeding habitat in Florida, and migratory corridors in both states. The agency didn't propose any critical habitat within the north Pacific Ocean segment.

The critical habitat designations identify habitat that is essential to endangered and threatened species. The public has until Sept. 16 to comment on the proposed habitat rules. The rules would not necessarily mean new restrictions in human activity, NOAA Fisheries said. Only activities that require federal actions, funding or permitting – such as beach renourishment – would require measures to avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the species and its habitat.

The U.S. loggerhead nesting season occurs from April through September, with a peak in June and July. Nesting occurs primarily at night, and in recent years, many beach communities have worked to dim their oceanfront lighting to aid the turtles. Tiny hatchlings are confused by bright lights and can't make their way to the sea.

Such tactics have worked, said Suzi Fox, the executive director of the Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch near Bradenton, Fla., which has helped install thousands of turtle-friendly lights on the island. Most years, there are 120 to 140 nests. Last year there were 360 nests, and so far this nesting season has 260.

Female turtles don't reach sexual maturity until their 30s, so Fox also suspects loggerheads have been helped by changes put in place three decades ago when they were first listed as threatened. The turtles return to the beach where they were hatched to lay their eggs.

"It could be stuff we did 30 years ago," Fox said. "It takes these girls 30 years to reproduce. That's what puts them at such high risk at the earlier part of their lives. Getting them to 35 years, that's the hard part."

In 2011, NOAA Fisheries changed the listing of loggerhead sea turtles under the Endangered Species Act from a single threatened species to nine distinct population segments. Two of those are in U.S. waters: the northwest Atlantic Ocean, where the turtles are threatened, and the north Pacific Ocean, where they are endangered.