

Trump administration sued over endangered Florida sea turtle protection from climate change

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Several environmental groups filed a lawsuit Wednesday claiming agencies in the Trump administration have failed to protect green sea turtle habitat as required by the Endangered Species Act.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, says the turtles' nesting beaches in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, as well as their ocean habitat, face threats from sea level rise brought on by climate change and plastic pollution, according to a news release from the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the plaintiffs.

Other plaintiffs are the Sea Turtle Oversight Protection and the Turtle Island Restoration Network.

The lawsuit asks the court to rule that several federal agencies are in violation of the Endangered Species Act and order them to designate sites — unspecified as yet — as critical habitat for turtles, which could affect development.

Defendants include:

- Interior Department Secretary David Bernhardt
 - Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross
 - Margaret Everson, principal deputy director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
 - Chris Oliver, assistant administrator for fisheries at the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration
 - National Marine Fisheries Service
- Climate change, sea level rise

The lawsuit acknowledges green sea turtle populations have been on a general increase over the last few years, but notes the National Marine Fisheries Service and Fish & Wildlife Service in 2016 found that threats from climate change and sea level rise mean the turtles still need protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The act prohibits federal agencies from authorizing activities that will destroy or harm a listed species' critical habitat.

"Floridians should be proud of how far we've come with green sea turtle recovery, but the fight's not over yet," Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the Center for Biological Diversity said in a prepared statement. "Now the feds have to step up and ensure that sea turtles have safe passage to nest on our beaches. These imperiled animals can't afford any more delays."

Donna Bickert, of north Dallas, took this video of sea turtle hatchlings leaving their nest July 28, while on vacation at Disney's Vero Beach Resort.

Although the lawsuit doesn't specify where the protected habitat should be, it would, if successful, "seek to address nesting habitat in Florida," Lopez told TCPalm.

The critical habitat designation, she said, would "add a layer of protection against harm from federally funded or authorized projects that would destroy or adversely modify the habitat."

Green sea turtle populations around the world are listed as either endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Complete nest numbers from 2019 aren't yet available from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, but Ecological Associates Inc. in Jensen Beach counted 5,443 green sea turtle nests, according to Operations Director Niki Desjardins, on the beaches the company monitors in:

- Indian River County, the entire county coastline except for the Disney resort area
- St. Lucie County, Normandy Beach south to the Martin County line and just south of the Fort Pierce Inlet
- Martin County, the southern end of Hutchinson Island, St. Lucie Inlet State Park and the Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge.

Along the Treasure Coast, green sea turtles are considered threatened. So are loggerheads, which lay the most nests in the area, by far. Leatherback sea turtles are endangered locally.

Whether endangered or threatened, sea turtles, their nests and their eggs are protected by federal and state laws.

Of the three species, only “greenies” are typically found in the Indian River Lagoon.

The official sea turtle nesting season runs March 1 through Nov. 15, and the arrival of the three species commonly found on the Treasure Coast overlap; but generally, leatherbacks come first, followed by loggerheads and then green sea turtles.

Because of the turtles' protected status, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission says people should avoid handling eggs or hatchlings from washed-out nests they find on beaches without first calling the FWC hotline at 888-404-3922.

Wildlife biologists will tell you what to do over the phone. When you call, be prepared to send photos and give an exact location so a response can come quickly.

All three counties along the Treasure Coast also have laws limiting lighting at residences and businesses on and near the beach.