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Environmental group to sue over sea turtle protections

January 12, 2021 6:56 AM in [News](#)

Source: [Associated Press](#)

By: [Associated Press](#)

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — An environmental group has told the National Marine Fisheries Service that it's going to court over reductions in plans to keep endangered and threatened sea turtles from drowning in shrimp nets.

"A shrimp cocktail is not worth the life of a sea turtle," Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release Monday.

The fisheries service cannot comment on pending litigation, fisheries service spokeswoman Allison Garrett said.

The fisheries service, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in late 2019 [scaled back](#) plans to make inshore shrimpers put turtle escape hatches into their nets.

Instead of applying to about 5,800 inshore shrimp boats in the Gulf of Mexico and southeast Atlantic, it applies only to boats at least 40 feet (12.2 meters) long — fewer than 1,100. And rather than affecting all three kinds of inshore shrimp nets, the devices will be required only in the most common ones, called skimmer nets.

Turtle excluder devices, commonly called TEDs, have metal bars set 4 inches (10 centimeters) apart on a vertical slant to deflect anything bigger to an opening at the top of the net. To protect smaller turtles, skimmer net TEDS will have 3-inch (7.6-centimeter) openings, NOAA Fisheries said.

TEDs have been required for decades on large offshore shrimp boats, but shrimpers have said they could be difficult to operate safely on smaller boats that work in inshore waters.

Under U.S. law, people and groups planning challenges to actions taken under the Endangered Species Act have to give the government 60 days notice. That's what the Center for Biological Diversity is doing. Earthjustice attorneys are representing the center, Defenders of Wildlife and Turtle Island Restoration Network.