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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Parts 222 and 223

[Docket No. 0809241260-81267-01]

RIN 0648-XK78

Sea Turtle Conservation; Shrimp Trawling Requirements

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule.

SUMMARY: NMFS issues this temporary rule for a period of 30 days, to allow shrimp fishermen to use limited tow times as an alternative to Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in state and Federal waters offshore of Louisiana (from the Mississippi/Louisiana boundary to the Texas/Louisiana boundary) extending offshore 20 nautical miles. This action is necessary because environmental conditions resulting from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike are preventing some fishermen from using TEDs effectively.

DATES: Effective from September 26, 2008 through October 27, 2008.

ADDRESSES: Requests for copies of the Environmental Assessment on this action should be addressed to the Assistant Regional Administrator, Protected Resources Division, NMFS, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Michael Barnette, 727-551-5794.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

All sea turtles that occur in U.S. waters are listed as either endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). The Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) turtles are listed as endangered. The loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) and green (*Chelonia mydas*) turtles are listed as threatened, except for breeding populations of green turtles in Florida and on the Pacific coast of Mexico, which are listed as endangered.

Sea turtles are incidentally taken, and some are killed, as a result of numerous activities, including fishery-related

trawling activities in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic seaboard. Under the ESA and its implementing regulations, the taking of sea turtles is prohibited, with exceptions identified in 50 CFR 223.206(d), or according to the terms and conditions of a biological opinion issued under section 7 of the ESA, or according to an incidental take permit issued under section 10 of the ESA. The incidental taking of turtles during shrimp or summer flounder trawling is exempted from the taking prohibition of section 9 of the ESA if the conservation measures specified in the sea turtle conservation regulations (50 CFR 223) are followed. The regulations require most shrimp trawlers and summer flounder trawlers operating in the southeastern United States (Atlantic area, Gulf area, and summer flounder sea turtle protection area, see 50 CFR 223.206) to have a NMFS-approved TED installed in each net that is rigged for fishing to allow sea turtles to escape. TEDs currently approved by NMFS include single-grid hard TEDs and hooped hard TEDs conforming to a generic description, the flounder TED, and one type of soft TED the Parker soft TED (see 50 CFR 223.207).

TEDs incorporate an escape opening, usually covered by a webbing flap, which allows sea turtles to escape from trawl nets. To be approved by NMFS, a TED design must be shown to be 97 percent effective in excluding sea turtles during testing based upon specific testing protocols (50 CFR 223.207(e)(1)). Most approved hard TEDs are described in the regulations (50 CFR 223.207(a)) according to generic criteria based upon certain parameters of TED design, configuration, and installation, including height and width dimensions of the TED opening through which the turtles escape.

The regulations governing sea turtle take prohibitions and exemptions provide for the use of limited tow times as an alternative to the use of TEDs for vessels with certain specified characteristics or under certain special circumstances. The provisions of 50 CFR 223.206(d)(3)(ii) specify that the NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries (AA) may authorize compliance with tow time restrictions as an alternative to the TED requirement if the AA determines that the presence of algae, seaweed, debris, or other special environmental conditions in a particular area makes trawling with TED-equipped nets impracticable. The provisions of 50 CFR 223.206(d)(3)(i) specify the maximum tow times that may be used when tow time limits are authorized as an alternative to the use of TEDs. Each tow may be no more than

55 minutes from April 1 through October 31 and no more than 75 minutes from November 1 through March 31, as measured from the time that the trawl doors enter the water until they are removed from the water. These tow time limits are designed to minimize the level of mortality of sea turtles that are captured by trawl nets not equipped with TEDs.

Recent Events

On September 5 and 15, 2008, the NMFS Southeast Regional Administrator received requests from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (MDMR), respectively, to allow the use of tow times as an alternative to turtle excluder devices (TEDs) in state and Federal waters because of excessive storm-related debris on the fishing grounds as a result of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. When a TED is clogged with debris, it can no longer catch shrimp effectively nor can it effectively exclude turtles. Phone conversations between NMFS Southeast Region's Protected Resources staff, fishermen, and the states' resource agency staffs confirm there are problems with debris in state and Federal waters off Louisiana (from the Mississippi/Louisiana boundary to the Texas/Louisiana boundary) extending offshore 20 nautical miles, which are likely to affect the effectiveness of TEDs; discussions between NMFS Southeast Region's Protected Resources staff, fishermen, and the states' resource agency staffs, and a survey of Mississippi waters found no significant remaining issues stemming from storm-related debris on the shrimp fishing grounds. Louisiana has stated that their marine enforcement agents will enforce the tow time restrictions.

Special Environmental Conditions

The AA finds that debris washed into hurricane-affected state and Federal waters off of Louisiana (from the Mississippi/Louisiana boundary to the Texas/Louisiana boundary), extending offshore 20 nautical miles, has created special environmental conditions that make trawling with TED-equipped nets impracticable. Therefore, the AA issues this notification to authorize the use of restricted tow times as an alternative to the use of TEDs in state and Federal waters off of Louisiana (from the Mississippi/Louisiana boundary to the Texas/Louisiana boundary) extending offshore 20 nautical miles, for a period of 30 days. Tow times must be limited to no more than 55 minutes measured from the time trawl doors enter the

water until they are retrieved from the water.

A survey of Mississippi waters found no significant remaining issues stemming from storm-related debris in the shrimp fishery. Therefore, the MDMR request for an exemption was not granted.

Continued Use of TEDs

NMFS encourages shrimp trawlers in the affected areas to continue to use TEDs if possible, even though they are authorized under this action to use restricted tow times.

NMFS' gear experts have provided several general operational recommendations to fishermen to maximize the debris exclusion ability of TEDs that may allow some fishermen to continue using TEDs without resorting to restricted tow times. To exclude debris, NMFS recommends the use of hard TEDs made of either solid rod or of hollow pipe that incorporate a bent angle at the escape opening, in a bottom-opening configuration. In addition, the installation angle of a hard TED in the trawl extension is an important performance element in excluding debris from the trawl. High installation angles can trap debris either on or in front of the bars of the TED; NMFS recommends an installation angle of 45°, relative to the normal horizontal flow of water through the trawl, to optimize the TED's ability to exclude turtles and debris. Furthermore, the use of accelerator funnels, which are allowable modifications to hard TEDs, is not recommended in areas with heavy amounts of debris or vegetation. Lastly, the webbing flap that is usually installed to cover the turtle escape opening may be modified to help exclude debris quickly: the webbing flap can either be cut horizontally to shorten it so that it does not overlap the frame of the TED or be slit in a fore-and-aft direction to facilitate the exclusion of debris. The use of the double cover flap TED will also aid in debris exclusion.

All of these recommendations represent legal configurations of TEDs for shrimpers fishing in the affected areas. This action does not authorize any other departure from the TED requirements, including any illegal modifications to TEDs. In particular, if TEDs are installed in trawl nets, they may not be sewn shut.

Alternative to Required Use of TEDs

The authorization provided by this temporary rule applies to all shrimp trawlers that would otherwise be required to use TEDs in accordance with the requirements of 50 CFR 223.206(d)(2) who are operating in

hurricane-affected state and Federal waters off Louisiana (from the Mississippi/Louisiana boundary to the Texas/Louisiana boundary), extending offshore 20 nautical miles, for a period of 30 days. Through this temporary rule, shrimp trawlers may choose either restricted tow times or TEDs to comply with the sea turtle conservation regulations, as prescribed above.

Alternative to Required Use of TEDs; Termination

The AA, at any time, may withdraw or modify this temporary authorization to use tow time restrictions in lieu of TEDs through publication of a notice in the **Federal Register**, if necessary to ensure adequate protection of endangered and threatened sea turtles. Under this procedure, the AA may modify the affected area or impose any necessary additional or more stringent measures, including more restrictive tow times, synchronized tow times, or withdrawal of the authorization if the AA determines that the alternative authorized by this rule is not sufficiently protecting turtles or no longer needed. The AA may also terminate this authorization if information from enforcement, state authorities, or NMFS indicates compliance cannot be monitored effectively. This authorization will expire automatically on October 27, 2008, unless it is explicitly extended through another notification published in the **Federal Register**.

Classification

This action has been determined to be not significant for purposes of Executive Order 12866.

The AA has determined that this action is necessary to respond to an environmental situation to allow more efficient fishing for shrimp, while providing effective protection for endangered and threatened sea turtles pursuant to the ESA and applicable regulations.

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B), the AA finds that there is good cause to waive prior notice and opportunity to comment on this temporary rule. The AA finds that unusually high amounts of post-hurricane debris are creating special environmental conditions that make trawling with TED-equipped nets impractical. Prior notice and the opportunity to receive public comment are impracticable and contrary to the public interest in this instance because providing notice and comment would prevent the agency from providing the affected industry timely relief from the effects of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike,

while providing effective protection for sea turtles.

Many shrimp fishermen in Louisiana may be unable to operate under the special environmental conditions created by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike without an alternative to the use of TEDs. Therefore, The AA finds that there is good cause to waive the 30-day delay in effective date pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3) to provide alternatives to comply with the sea turtle regulations in a timely manner. For the reasons above, the AA finds that this temporary rule should not be subject to a 30-day delay in effective date, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(1).

Since prior notice and an opportunity for public comment are not required to be provided for this action by 5 U.S.C. 553, or by any other law, the analytical requirements of 5 U.S.C. 601 *et seq.* are inapplicable.

The AA prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for this rule. Copies of the EA are available (see **ADDRESSES**).

Dated: September 26, 2008.

James W. Balsiger,

Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 071106671-8010-02]

RIN 0648-XK79

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Pacific Cod by Non-American Fisheries Act Crab Vessels Catching Pacific Cod for Processing by the Inshore Component in the Central Regulatory Area of the Gulf of Alaska

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS is prohibiting directed fishing for Pacific cod by non-American Fisheries Act (AFA) crab vessels that are subject to sideboard limits catching Pacific cod for processing by the inshore component in the Central Regulatory Area of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). This action is necessary to prevent exceeding the 2008 Pacific cod sideboard limit established for non-AFA crab vessels catching Pacific cod for processing by