

SEA TURTLE BYCATCH IN TRAWL FISHERIES

#8b

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

APRIL 2022

BACKGROUND: As we [presented](#) at the December Council meeting, fisheries bycatch is a primary threat to sea turtles in our region, and the highest trawl bycatch occurs in the Atlantic croaker, longfin squid, and summer flounder fisheries. We have tested gear (e.g., Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs)) and operational (e.g., data loggers to monitor tow durations) modifications in these three fisheries. While there is still research to be completed, the results indicate that these modifications can be effective at reducing the severity of interactions with sea turtles and are operationally feasible.

UPDATES SINCE DECEMBER PRESENTATION: Decomposed sea turtles were removed from the numbers presented at the December Council meeting. As a result, the total number of observed sea turtle interactions in trawl gear from 2000 to 2019 was 264, with 95 occurring on croaker trips (identified by the top landed species by hail weight), 50 on longfin squid trips and 45 on summer flounder trips.

POTENTIAL MITIGATION: While final operational feasibility research is completed, NMFS is gathering early input and information from the public, fishing industry, and other stakeholder groups to inform any future measures. Given the results of previous research, we are considering:

- 1) Requiring TEDs with a large escape opening in trawls that target Atlantic croaker, weakfish, and longfin squid to reduce injury and mortality resulting from accidental capture in these fisheries;
- 2) Moving the current northern boundary of the TED requirements in the summer flounder fishery (i.e., the Summer Flounder Fishery-Sea Turtle Protection Area) to a point farther north to more comprehensively address capture in this fishery;
- 3) Amending the TED requirements for the summer flounder fishery to require a larger escape opening to allow the release of larger hard-shelled and leatherback sea turtles; and
- 4) Adding an option requiring limited tow durations, if feasible and enforceable, in lieu of TEDs in these fisheries to provide flexibility to the fisheries.

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION RECEIVED: Council/Commission meetings, public webinars, call in days, and additional public responses resulted in approximately 30 questions and 30 comments. Feedback consisted of questions on the sea turtle bycatch estimates, observer data, and research. Comments were received on the geographical range of the measures, tow duration issues, fishery definitions, and economic impacts. Several information needs were also identified related to additional data and research.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Background information (including the latest trawl bycatch estimate), descriptions of TED designs, research results, type of information needed, recordings of the public webinars, and how to comment can be found at our [website](#).