

Turtles threatened by federal permit that would help NC fishermen

Associated Press

WILMINGTON, N.C. - Gill net fishermen in Pamlico Sound could kill up to 100 threatened and endangered sea turtles every year through 2010 under a federal permit sought by the state.

The permit also would allow up to 320 additional turtles to be caught and released during each September-to-December flounder fishing season.

The proposal has outraged environmentalists and drawn criticism from some federal and state officials. They note that the Army Corps of Engineers isn't allowed to harm a third of that number of turtles for its dredging operations across the whole Southeast.

The state Division of Marine Fisheries believes the proposed management plan balances the needs of the turtles with the livelihoods of the region's fishermen.

"It's a real tough balancing act," said fisheries biologist Blake Price. "But we think we're doing everything we can do to maintain a lucrative, sustainable fishery and remain in compliance with federal law."

North Carolina's ocean and coastal waters are home to five species of sea turtles, all protected under federal and state law.

Three of the species - Kemp's ridley, leatherback and hawksbill - are listed as endangered. Loggerhead and green sea turtles, the most common types found in Pamlico Sound, are listed as threatened.

Pamlico Sound also has become a favorite fishing ground of flounder fishermen, even though an increase in the number of stranded sea turtles led to the closing of the deepwater areas to gill nets in 1999.

Many of the turtles in the sound are juvenile turtles, and Matthew Godfrey, a sea turtle biologist with the state Wildlife Resources Commission, said he worried about their possible removal from the population.

Several officials also noted the seemingly high number of allowable sea turtle deaths compared to those approved for other agencies that have received permits to work along the state's coast.

For example, the Army Corps of Engineers is allowed to take a maximum of five turtles a year as part of the Wilmington Harbor deepening project. But Therese Conant with National Marine Fisheries said its not fair to just compare the numbers.

"Just looking at a number, there are so many other factors you have to consider," she said. "It's like comparing apples and oranges."

The turtle numbers included as part of the state's application are largely based on observer data since 2000 and assume the worst will happen, Price said.

The most documented and reported sea turtles killed were 26 in 2004, according to National Marine Fisheries. The highest number of non-lethal interactions was 162 in 2002.

The new permit comes as the size and value of the flounder catch in Pamlico Sound are falling. In 1998, flounder landings in the fall season stood at 813,180 pounds, valued at nearly \$1.5 million. Last year, the catch fell to 410,000 pounds, valued at \$700,000.