NOAA Strengthens Protection for Harbor Porpoises off the Northeastern U.S.

NOAA’s Fisheries Service today announced improvements to fishing rules intended to keep harbor porpoises out of gillnets set in waters off the U.S. East Coast, and to reduce the number of these animals that die after encounters with the gear.

These changes address the two primary causes of a recent increase in harbor porpoise bycatch in gillnets: increased bycatch in places where measures to prevent it are not currently required, and gaps in compliance with current management measures, such as improper use of pingers.

To address these problems, the measures announced today expand when and where acoustic net alarms, called “pingers,” are required on gillnets off New England, add new seasonal management measures off New Jersey, and define areas off New England that will close to gillnetters if harbor porpoise bycatch gets too high. However, expanded and more consistent use of pingers should reduce bycatch significantly.

Pingers have been required seasonally in gillnets off New England since 1998. However, they are sometimes used improperly, reducing their overall effectiveness. In the Mid-Atlantic region, measures are believed to have been less effective in recent years, mostly because some fishing gear was not properly modified to reduce the risk of capturing and retaining harbor porpoises.

In the Mid-Atlantic, a new management area is being created off the coast of New Jersey, encompassing waters where high bycatch has been seen recently. The area will be closed to gillnetting from February 1 to March 15, and gear modified to reduce the risk of bycatch will be required to fish there between January 1 and April 30 every year when gillnet fishing is allowed.

Between 1998, when gillnetters were first required to use pingers, gear modifications, and special management areas, and 2003, the number of harbor porpoise that died in gillnets declined from more than 1,500 per year to just a few hundred per year.

In 2003, however, bycatch numbers started to increase and about 1,000 animals are estimated to have died in gillnets in 2006, the most recent year for which there is an estimate. This exceeds allowable levels.

NOAA’s Fisheries Service met with a team of stakeholders in late 2007 and early 2008 to discuss ways to reverse this trend. The measures announced today are a result of those meetings and recommendations made by the team, as well as comments and recommendations from the general public.

- more -
The stakeholder team is one of several created in 1996 by the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act to help NOAA’s Fisheries Service devise better ways of reducing bycatch of marine mammals to allowable levels in the nation’s commercial fisheries. The harbor porpoise team’s goal is to reduce serious injuries and mortalities of harbor porpoises from interactions with gillnets to just a few dozen animals annually. The team currently has about 40 members, comprising affected fishermen, environmentalists, federal and state fishery officials, and marine mammal scientists.

Harbor porpoises are found in both the North Atlantic and the North Pacific, primarily in subarctic temperate, coastal and offshore waters. There are estimated to be about 89,000 animals in the population found off the Northeastern U.S. Harbor porpoises are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act, but are not listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth’s environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at http://www.noaa.gov or on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/noaa.lubchenco.