



NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center

**N E W S**

## **Agency Considers Changes to East Coast Large Whale Protection Plan**

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**Gloucester, MA** -- NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) is considering ways to further reduce the risk of large whale entanglements in commercial fishing gear along the U.S. East Coast. Proposals include required changes in some fishing gear, redefining management areas, and gear marking.

"The proposals are based on what's been learned in recent years through gear research, field use of modified gear, and a stepped-up program of sighting large whales," said Mary Colligan, who leads the NOAA Fisheries Service effort to protect large whales in the Northeast.

The proposals would revise the Agency's Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan, and are included in a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) issued on February 25. Public hearings on the DEIS and the six alternative proposals it evaluates will be held from Maine to Florida during March and April. Public comments will be accepted through April 26, 2005. A proposed rule, which will also have a public comment period, is not expected until the summer.

"We've identified what we believe are the best gear modifications available," said Colligan. "We'd like to expand their use to all of the operations that could seriously injure or kill whales, and refine where and when modified gear is required."

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The measures cover commercial fishing operations that use the types of pot, trap, or gillnet gear that is known to, or could, harm large whales along the East Coast. Among the proposed gear changes are requiring weak links on all flotation and/or weighted devices attached to the buoy lines, and phasing out use of floating groundline by 2008.

Colligan said the Agency also seeks to cover additional fisheries under the plan, and asks for comment on requiring gear to be marked, and on redefining management areas and exempted waters.

Since 1996, NOAA Fisheries Service has been working to eliminate the dangers posed to large whales by commercial fishing operations through a program of research, consultation with the fishing industry and whale experts, and regulatory actions. Several species of large whales are subject to entanglement. One of the most susceptible to entanglement injury, the North Atlantic right whale, is also one of the most endangered.

For more information, please visit the Agency's special website for this action, where relevant materials, including a summary outreach document can be viewed or downloaded:

<http://www.nero.noaa.gov/nero/hotnews/whales/index.html>

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