



Contact: Teri Frady  
508 495-2239

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## **NOAA Proposes More Ways to Reduce Capture of Harbor Porpoises in Northeast Gillnet Fisheries**

NOAA's Fisheries Service has proposed strengthening fishing rules intended to keep harbor porpoises out of gillnets set in waters off the Northeastern U.S., to reduce the number of these animals that are killed because of encounters with the gear.

Measures proposed would 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 that would close to gillnetters if harbor porpoise bycatch gets too high within them.

Public comments will be accepted on the proposal through August 20, 2009.

The measures proposed today address the two primary causes of a recent increase in the numbers of harbor porpoise killed annually in Northeast gillnets: non-compliance with current management measures (for example, improper use of pingers) and increased bycatch in places where measures to prevent it are not currently required.

Pingers have been required seasonally in gillnets off New England since 1998. They emit a sound that harbor porpoises avoid, thus avoiding the nets to which they are attached. These devices have been an important and effective way of keeping harbor porpoises away from gillnets. However some fishermen are either not using them when and where they are required, or are not using them properly, reducing their overall effectiveness as a deterrent.

The most significant measures proposed for New England would require pinger use over more fishing area and for more time, and define new areas where bycatch has been high in recent years. These areas would become closed to gillnetting for two to three months if harbor porpoise bycatch is too high within them. However, expanded and more consistent use of pingers should reduce bycatch significantly.

In the Mid-Atlantic, proposed measures include the creation of a new management area off the coast of New Jersey encompassing waters where high bycatch has been observed in recent years. The area would be closed to gillnetting from February 1 to March 15, and gear modified to reduce the risk of bycatch would be required to fish there between January 1 and April 30 every year during the times when gillnet fishing is allowed.

Northeast gillnetters already use pingers, gear modifications, and special management areas as required to reduce the risk of harming harbor porpoises. Because of these efforts, the number of animals killed in Northeast gillnets declined from more than 1,500 per year to just a few hundred per year between 1999 and 2003.

In 2003, however, bycatch numbers started to increase and about 1,000 animals are estimated to have been killed in Northeast gillnets in 2006, the most recent year for which there is an estimate.

NOAA's Fisheries Service met with a team of stakeholders at the end of 2007 and early in 2008 to discuss ways to reverse the increasing trend in harbor porpoise bycatch. The measures proposed today are a result of those meetings.

The stakeholder team is one of several created in 1996 by the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act to help NOAA Fisheries Service devise better ways of reducing bycatch of marine mammals 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.

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