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COMMERCE DEPARTMENT ANNOUNCES NATIONAL BYCATCH STRATEGY

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today unveiled its strategy to further reduce bycatch through fishing gear improvements, standardized reporting and education & outreach. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Commerce Department.

NOAA Fisheries believes this strategy provides the most efficient and effective plan to achieve further success in reducing bycatch. Last year, the agency received a request from an environmental advocacy group to reduce bycatch through fishery regulations. After considering the request and public comment, NOAA fisheries developed its strategy to achieve significant results in reducing bycatch.

"Minimizing bycatch is one of the most important things we can do to conserve fish and other marine species," said NOAA Fisheries Director Bill Hogarth. "We are continuing to work with fishermen to find ways to reduce unintentional catches, and this strategy will allow us to renew our commitment to bycatch reduction efforts and update our 1998 strategy."

The National Bycatch Strategy is based on the 1998 NOAA Fisheries report, *Managing the Nation's Bycatch*, which contains the agency's national bycatch goal, "to implement conservation and management measures for living marine resources that will minimize, to the extent practicable, bycatch and the mortality of bycatch that cannot be avoided."

Published today in the *Federal Register*, the strategy outlines how NOAA Fisheries will improve upon and expand current bycatch reduction efforts and undertake new bycatch initiatives, such as: assessing regional progress toward meeting national bycatch objectives and strategies; developing a national approach that standardizes bycatch reporting; implementing the national bycatch goal through regional implementation plans; expanding international approaches to bycatch reduction; undertaking new education and outreach efforts; and identifying long-term funding requirements. The President's 2004 budget request includes \$2.8 million to augment the agency's bycatch reduction activities.

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Bycatch is a complex problem that affects many major U.S. fisheries. Fisheries managers have long recognized that bycatch reduction could help rebuild overfished stocks and lead to more robust fisheries, and would aid in the protection of marine mammals, sea turtles and seabirds. Through innovative research, strong working partnerships and thoughtful regulation, NOAA Fisheries, along with the regional fishery management councils, fishermen and other stakeholders, has made significant progress in bycatch reduction over the past several years. Examples of accomplishments and ongoing activities include:

- Modifying gear to decrease halibut bycatch in the Alaska flatfish and Pacific cod trawl fisheries; and modifying trawls to decrease rockfish bycatch in West Coast sole fisheries;
- Reducing shrimp trawl bycatch of finfish in the Gulf of Mexico by 40 percent since 1998 with the required use of bycatch reduction devices; On Feb. 21, 2003, the agency revised requirements for turtle excluder devices to provide better protection for large leatherback turtles;
- Developing “pingers” (acoustic devices that emit high-frequency sound) for the Northeast sink gillnet fishery to deter the harbor porpoise from being entangled in fixed sink gillnets;
- Supporting bycatch reduction research through the Cooperative Research Partners Initiative in the Northeast which is focused on numerous otter trawl configurations that take advantage of fish behavior in response to the gear;
- Developing otter trawl gears with “raised footropes” that have reduced flounder bycatch in the Northeast whiting fishery by as much as 40 percent to 50 percent;
- Doubling efforts to put observers on commercial vessels in 26 fisheries since 1996;
- Working with Atlantic pelagic longline fishermen to develop gear that will reduce the incidental catch and post-release mortality of sea turtles;
- Issuing new regulations in 2002 for hook-and-line pelagic fisheries of the Western Pacific intended to minimize or prevent injury of sea turtles;
- Instituting seasonal and time/area fishing restrictions where right whales congregate to feed and are vulnerable to becoming entangled in lines from fixed fishing gear;
- Supporting gear research programs in Alaska longline fisheries that have demonstrated reductions in seabird bycatch by 88-100 percent and are expected to result in new gear regulations.

The National Bycatch Strategy is available on NOAA Fisheries’ bycatch Web site (www.nmfs.noaa.gov/bycatch.htm), which brings together a wide variety of online bycatch resources. Data posted on the Web site include up-to-date regional summaries of bycatch data from observer programs; various reports including an online version of *Managing the Nation’s Bycatch*; species-specific bycatch regulations and policies; links to research, laws and international activities related to bycatch; and updates on NOAA Fisheries’ progress in implementing its new National Bycatch Strategy.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources, and the habitat on which they depend, through scientific research, management and enforcement. We provide effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.

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