

Look out for loggerheads: Turtle-nesting season begins

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April 30, 2009

No one knows whether Florida loggerhead sea turtles can dig out of the hole they're in: a steep drop in the number of nests in the past decade.

But federal fishery managers are tackling one part of that problem with an emergency regulation to curtail fishing-related turtle deaths in the Gulf of Mexico.

Friday begins the state sea-turtle nesting season, when thousands of the reptiles return to their home beach and lay eggs, with the young hatchlings breaking out several weeks later.

Florida beaches are among the world's most important nesting grounds for loggerhead turtles, which has experts worried about a steep drop in nest numbers since 1998. Loggerhead-nest totals dropped 41 percent at the key beaches tracked for long-term trends, said the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Last year's tallies offered hope for researchers, with a slight rise from the 2007 record low. "Most beaches were up last year, and we had a nice uptake, but it's not enough to buck the trend," said Anne Meylan of the commission's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. "We'll just have to see what happens this year."

Scientists have debated what might be behind the drop. The leading theory points to fishing-related deaths that affect loggerheads more than other turtles. On

many of the same Florida beaches, green and leatherback sea turtles are enjoying the same upward climb in nest numbers that loggerheads had before 1998.

An emergency regulation was announced Wednesday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to temporarily bar bottom long-line fishing in shallow Gulf waters. That could be a part of the solution.

NOAA's fisheries service barred commercial boats catching grouper with that fishing method in waters less than 50 fathoms deep. Researchers found that part of the Gulf is a prime foraging area for turtles.

About half of the turtles caught on those lines drowned. The lines are 5 to 8 miles long and weighted to keep them near the bottom.

"That level of mortality is extremely high, and it was having an impact on loggerhead sea turtles," said Dave Allison, senior campaign manager for the conservation group **Oceana**. "This rule is important because we feel confident this will reduce the number of turtles that will be taken in the bottom long-line fishery."

But one regulation won't solve the turtle dilemma.

"You really can't point to one source of mortality," said Roy Crabtree, administration for the Southeast regional office of the federal fisheries service. "It's really the accumulation of different events."

"But we have an obligation to reduce turtle takes and protect these animals as best we can."