



Contact: Maggie Mooney-Seus
978-281-9175

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Annual fall fishing closure required to protect harbor porpoises in Gulf of Maine

NOAA Fisheries has announced that an area of the Gulf of Maine will be closed to gillnets annually from October 1 through November 30 beginning in 2012 to reduce harbor porpoise deaths.

This closure is required because observed bycatch rates for harbor porpoises in this fishery have exceeded the trigger specified in the harbor porpoise conservation plan. The plan was developed by a Take Reduction Team, a group of fishermen, scientists, environmentalists and managers. Take Reduction Teams are required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act to reduce bycatch of marine mammals.

Historically, October and November are among the months with the highest harbor porpoise bycatch rates in the Gulf of Maine. In 2011, 36 groundfish sector gillnet vessels made 721 fishing trips into this area during October and November. The economic impacts of this closure area will depend on the extent to which fishermen are able to shift their effort to other areas outside the closure area.

Owners and operators of permitted gillnet vessels were advised in a letter from NOAA Fisheries last August that closures might be necessary because observed harbor porpoise bycatch rates were high. Final analysis of the first year of fishing under this conservation plan indicates that the observed bycatch rate for the Gulf of Maine was more than double the trigger level, requiring the closure this fall to comply with the harbor porpoise conservation plan.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act was enacted on October 21, 1972. All marine mammals are protected under this Act, which prohibits, with certain exceptions, the "take" of marine mammals in U.S. waters and by Americans on the high seas, and the importation of marine mammals and marine mammal products into the United States.

A conference call and webinar lead by the Take Reduction Team has been scheduled from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. on Thurs., April 26. Interested members of the public are welcome to join the call. During the call, an overview of the Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Plan and bycatch analysis for the first complete fishing year under the new conservation management plan will be presented. Please send an email to Marjorie.Mooney-Seus@noaa.gov for call-in information.

NOAA is also planning to convene a formal meeting of the Take Reduction Team this fall to assess new harbor porpoise population information and additional bycatch data. This meeting will be announced in the Federal Register and on the NOAA Fisheries Northeast Regional Office website.

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center harbor porpoise bycatch rate analysis can be found at <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd1208/>. Other information about the Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Team can be found on the Northeast Regional Office website at <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/hptrp>.

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