

**ALWTRP Scoping Meeting
Garden City, Georgia
Aug 24, 2011**

NMFS Staff: Barb Zoodsma, Kate Swails, Jessica Powell

Number in attendance (not counting NMFS staff): 8

Including:

- Clay George, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Take Reduction Team Georgia State Representative

This meeting began with Ms. Zoodsma giving two overview presentations of the laws and regulations relevant to the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan, the necessity of a proposed rule to reduce large whale takes associated with vertical lines, the co-occurrence modeled to help inform decisions related to this action, and the purpose and process behind scoping.

Ms. Zoodsma stressed that the scoping meetings were meant to engage stakeholders and acquire input early on in the process prior to the development of any formal plan or ideas.

One commenter suggested that the frequency of gear marking should be based on the average length of line found on entangled whales.

Commenter noted that there were no high co-occurrence areas in the SC/GA area, thus would prefer to see the rule focused on smaller, high priority areas.

One commenter noted that there were likely only 3000 vertical lines in SC waters, and thus SC was not as dangerous when compared to the Northeast.

Commenter noted that blue crab fishermen only fish 12-16 weeks offshore in December to early March and then move back inshore.

One commenter asked if there is any particular color underwater that was more visible to whales. For instance, was the color red the least noticeable?

Ms. Zoodsma responded that the New England Aquarium was looking into that question. Mr. George also noted that he was not hopeful that this research would provide potential mitigation measures because whales can feed in the dark.

Commenter noted that crabbers were already limited to 200 pots per person in Georgia because the fishery was limited entry.

Ms. Zoodsma inquired if crabs move with the water temperature.

The commercial fishermen present stated they do sometimes move offshore.

Commenter noted that he has never seen a whale within 10 mi of SC and 8 mi of GA.

Commenter noted that all blue crabbers currently in this area use hog rings, #10 line, and mark their gear with orange.

Commenter said that sometimes gear was lost due to weak link interactions with the wench.

Commenter noted that 50 feet was the maximum depth blue crab fishermen in this area would fish.

Commenter stated that there is more tide in this area when compared to Florida, thus the fishermen use more line. Furthermore, the traps are the same standard size and materials (e.g. rebarb, #10 lines) as Florida traps, however SC/ GA traps may be heavier (approximately 27 lbs.) depending on the tides.

Commenter was unclear about the purpose of more gear markings since the pot buoy was already marked.

Ms. Zoodsma explained that the buoys were intended to pop off via the weak link if a whale became entangled in order to help the line slide through the baleen and be shed.

One commenter stated that electrical tape doesn't work and that spray paint color typically becomes dirty quickly. The best way is to sew in a colored line.

Commenter confirmed that the sand on the line grinds the spray paint color off as it goes through the wench.

Mr. George asked if the commercial crabbers in attendance would be willing to pay more for colored line?

A commercial crabber responded that if bought line with a colored line tracer in bulk it may not be more expensive.

Mr. George responded that it may be difficult to require a colored line because there are so many different manufacturers.

A commenter inquired what number would be considered too many or an acceptable number of lines in the water. He noted it would be easier to come up with ideas with this number in mind.

Ms. Swails responded that there was no goal or known number and that is why NMFS has come to the stakeholders for ideas.

Ms. Swails inquired if commercial crabbers would be willing to put more marks on their lines.

The commercial crabbers in attendance agreed and one commenter stated that it is easy to coil the line and spray.

One commenter stated that he realized that this area was a calving ground and inquired which month the whales cross SC waters.

Ms. Zoodsma responded that right whales likely travel through SC waters multiple times in a season.

One commenter noted that he had heard that GA DNR was considering closing federal waters to crab pots in order to protect whales, however the commenter indicated he had seen the whales closer inshore

Mr. George responded that his agency had put this idea forward because there are less than 20 documented sightings of right whales inside 3 mi of the GA coastline. The idea was to reduce the risk to whales.

The commenter further noted that this would also not be effective because there are so few lines (15 fishermen) offshore anyway.

Mr. George responded the other idea behind the proposal was to prevent new fisheries from emerging.

Commercial fishermen in attendance indicated that new fisheries needed the state's permission to open a new fishery, even in federal waters because it would require a landings permit to sell a federal product in the state of Georgia.

One commenter noted that crabbers will be reduced to 100 pots in Georgia (this is along with an already limited access fishery which currently only employs 15 fishermen).

Another commenter noted there were only about 15 blue crab fishermen in SC.

Commenter clarified that, currently, fishermen can set pots in federal or inshore SC state waters.

One commenter suggested that the government could buy out the fishery.

A commenter asked if any whales have ever been reported as entangled in blue crab pots.

Ms. Zoodsma responded that there were no known entanglements to her knowledge and Mr. George said he had not seen in the 10 years he has been working with right whales

Commenter noted that typically crabs are fished 3-4 miles from shore in SC.

Commenter noted that he has never seen a right whale.

Mr. George explained that there are also not many documented sightings in SC especially given the number of whales that must pass SC to be seen in large numbers in GA and FL. Mr. George cautioned that likely the whales spend a lot of time subsurface when traveling so that is possibly why whales are not seen, not necessarily because they are just not there.