

**Question-Answer Session  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
Sea Turtle Press Conference  
National Press Club  
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DR. LENT: Thank you very much. We'll be happy to take any questions in the room now. I also want to reiterate that all of our speakers are available for follow-up questions one on one. Shall we go ahead and take a few questions? Yes, sir.

Q: I'm Larry Lipman with Cox Newspapers. Are these measures going to be voluntary, are they going to be compulsory for domestic fishermen? What would be the cost of converting from these hooks to the new types of hooks? And I want to make sure that I understand, Mr. Hogarth, when you said you're going to ask Congress to take legislative action to require that if other countries do not comply with this you would ban the import of their product. Is that right?

DR. LENT: Bill, why don't you come on up, and I'll address the first part of your question, which had to do with domestic implementation. We are right now working on some regulatory packages that will include as alternatives some of the measures that we found in these fisheries. That includes for the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico fishery and the fishery in the Western Pacific in Hawaii, the Hawaii-based pelagic longline fishery. As part of those regulatory proposals we will be analyzing the costs and benefits of the various alternatives, and notably the cost to the fishing fleet.

I might ask Bill to comment on the legislative issue and then perhaps someone from industry could talk about costs.

Q: When you say alternatives, this is sort of optional?

DR. LENT: Thank you for that follow-up. Yes, in some cases these measures would be mandatory. We have in the past had some voluntary measures. But where we have solid evidence and where we can justify the cost of implementing this as opposed to the benefit, then it would be in our best interests to consider making them mandatory. This is all part of our regulatory process, and again, this is just underway; the documents are just now being prepared. As soon as they're available they'll be posted on our website. Bill, do you want to comment on the legislative issue? And then maybe Charlie or Nelson, you guys can comment.

DR. HOGARTH: Just a little bit further on this. When an endangered species is involved we have to do what's called a Section Seven Consultation with that fishery, and we look at that fishery and how it interacts with the endangered species, and then we have to do a biological opinion of whether that fishery should operate. This technology is the best scientific technology we presently have for the longline fishery, so we would expect it to be high on the list. We go through the process, we don't prejudge every fishery, but we expect this to be utilized. There is no doubt they'll have to use the gear that came out of this experiment. As we initiate consultation

in the Gulf with other turtles, this will be high on the list, as it is in Hawaii, to be looked at as the solution or partial solution, along with other things. But we think this is the best technology we have for longline fisherman to reduce the takes and mortality of turtles, and we will utilize it everywhere it's practical.

Q: You also said something about requiring other nations –

DR. HOGARTH: Okay, that was actually the second part. When we implemented turtle excluder devices in the shrimp fishery, the industry felt that they were not on a level playing ground with other countries that were killing turtles because they didn't have to use TEDs. If the industry wants to make an industry request to Congress, we would support their efforts to get the same level playing field in the longline fisheries as we have now for shrimp with the mandated use of TEDs on foreign vessels that catch shrimp for the U.S. market. This is not something that we get involved with unless the industry goes forward, and we would support them and work with them.

DR. LENT: Nelson, do you want to comment on cost?

MR. BEIDEMAN: The costs of the hooks would be pretty much negligible because the hooks are routinely replaced. So you would just start buying what you were and then pick up on the new hooks.

Q: Are they more expensive?

MR. BEIDEMAN: No, actually they're a little bit cheaper. You know, from an industry perspective we do expect this to become mandatory through various rulemakings over the next several months and years. As far as the equipment, the equipment here is a little more expensive. That may go \$1,000, \$1,200 depending on how much is required and how much backups a vessel would take. But the biggest thing about this is this is going to help not only turtles but across all bycatch species, and these are very practical tools and guidelines that are now tried and true and tested over a three-year period. I don't think that there's going to be a lot of resistance within the U.S. domestically to pick up these new technologies because it's a very progressive, very positive step, and as far as the hooks and baits, there are incentives for better fishing and higher quality catches to switch to.

Q: Mike Burnham, Greenwire. Short of international trade restrictions on countries that don't adopt these new technologies, what else can the United States do to ensure that they adopt conservation measures?

DR. LENT: The most important thing that we can do is at every opportunity, be it the IATTC working group, bycatch working group meeting next week where I'll be working alongside with Scott, or at other regional fishery management organization meetings, or at every bilateral meeting, taking every single opportunity to share with these folks what we've found through this experiment. And as Nelson pointed out, the good news is you can actually catch higher quality, better-priced fish.

So I think we have measures that we can take to the table that are a lot more palatable than measures such as shutting down fisheries. I think it's important for us to point out to our partners that as major importers of seafood, only one out of every 10 shrimp you eat in the U.S. is domestically produced. We import three to five times as much swordfish as we produce domestically. As consumers we have a strong interest in fleets around the world taking on these measures.

I have personally been involved in such talks with Taiwan, with Vietnam, and next week I'll be in Japan, not just with the Japanese but also with all of the member countries of IATTC. And there is a strong amount of persuasion and teamwork in convincing folks. It helps when organizations such as WWF or such as Bluewater reach out to their counterparts in these countries and work as a team in convincing folks that this is the future.

Anybody want to add anything just feel free to jump up. Bill -- Scott.

MR. BURNS: Just briefly, I wanted to add that NOAA employees are already engaged in on-the-ground initiatives with fleets in different parts of the world. I'm personally familiar with work that NOAA scientists are engaged in in Ecuador where they participated in workshops with fishing communities from far-flung parts of the country to demonstrate these techniques for safely letting turtles go, and to begin to work with those fleets that are interested in conducting experiments similar to the ones that the Bluewater folks here in the U.S. have done already.

And as Rebecca said, you know, we see from our perspective a strong U.S. voice in support of both disseminating these approaches and the technologies associated with them, but also in pushing other countries to move forward and deal with this problem in a serious way.

DR. LENT: Yes, sir?

Q: Rebecca, I'm Kirk Moore from the Asbury Park Press. Could you comment on how soon this gear might be tested in Pacific waters? I understand the Hawaiian longline fleet has slightly different circumstances regarding bycatch issues and fishing tactics, but when might they be trying this kind of equipment out in an experimental fishery there?

DR. LENT: We're looking right now at a proposal from the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council that would apply some of these techniques to reopened reduced-effort directed swordfish fishery that would be Hawaii based. And that would have a strict-observer requirement, it would have a cap on fishing effort, and it would also have an in-season cap basically on turtle interactions. So that would be one of the initial implementations of this year. It would actually be through a rulemaking rather than through a fishing experiment, but as I said, there would be safeguards in terms of reducing the level of directed swordfishing effort as well as an intermediate cap on turtle takes. Turtle takes are any interaction with turtles, not mortalities.

Q: When might --

DR. LENT: We're shooting for April or May.

Q: Marydele Donnelly with the Ocean Conservancy. Congratulations on the excellent work that has been done to date. I think that most of us who have been watching this issue for a number of years and been involved in it would say that you are to be congratulated for the great work that's been done. But we would also say that this is still in the more preliminary stage and that there is more work that needs to be done. And I'm wondering if you plan on having – supporting more experiments in 2004 and perhaps beyond that. For example, the 2003 data I don't know have been completely analyzed, but there seems to be an indication that hook size may be as important as hook design in reducing bycatch.

DR. LENT: Charlie or Sheryan, do you want to comment on that?

MR. BERGMANN: I'm Charlie Bergmann; I'm with the Pascagoula lab in Pascagoula, Mississippi. This is Sheryan Epperly. She's with the Miami lab at the Southeast Science Center. I don't know about any funding for continued experiments here in the U.S. I know that Ecuador is right on the threshold of doing an experiment with their longline fishery. I was at the ICCAT meeting in Ireland. The FAO was very interested in continuing with this effort. Taiwan is very interested in continuing with this effort, as well as Japan. There is an experiment just winding up in Costa Rica.

Just as a footnote on Ecuador, the genesis of the Ecuador workshops came from our presentation at the second annual longline workshop in Honolulu. The fishers from Ecuador that were at that workshop petitioned their government to petition our government through the IATTC to help them to bring our technology to them and share with them. There were over 800 people at 10 workshops. They were extremely happy to see this type of information. They look for any type of help. They would have switched over to this type of technology at that point if the equipment were available for them.

SHERYAN EPPERLY: Yes, I want to address Marydele's question about the domestic research. John and I are working on a proposal to do research in 2004. There are a lot of unfinished business left over from the experiments that we have been doing. She refers to other hooks, and that's true. We started looking at the 20-aught circle hook in 2003. It looks to be every bit as good as the 18-aught hooks, so maybe it's not just the magic of the 18-aught hook but 18-aught – and bigger and maybe for bigger turtles the larger hook is appropriate.

But we've been concentrating on the swordfish fishery for the last three years, and the largest fishery in the world is the tuna fishery, and we really have to begin shifting our effort and look at resolving some of the problems in the tuna fleet. We believe that that circle hook is appropriate in that fishery. The size is a question, and with the size of that hook what the impact may be on the target species catch. So the proposals that John and I are working on and thinking about are really going to be focusing more on getting comparable data in the tuna fishery.

We do realize there's still those unanswered questions, but there's a limited amount of time and the priority now I think is to quickly shift to the tuna fishery and try to do that with our domestic fleet this year, through Bluewater and cooperating fishermen.

DR. HOGARTH: Let me just add a couple things. Work will be done in the Pacific also as we look at opening up that fishery. And we will look at other specific things that need to be refined. This bycatch work and gear development is really the future of how you manage fisheries, by working to make fishing gear more selective. We've been doing that through the Pascagoula laboratory on virtually no money. President Bush, has got \$2.4 million in the '04 budget, set aside strictly for gear technology with the industry out of our Pascagoula laboratory. So we look to be doing more of this type of work in the future.

If we are going to solve the bycatch issue and have good, clean fisheries and good quality fisheries, we're going to have to continue working with the fishermen and gear. So specific things will be done in the coming months and even years.

DR. LENT: Any further questions?

Q: Andrew Guthrie from the Voice of America. I wanted to just check one thing. In your very opening remark you said all six species of sea turtle are endangered or threatened. There are seven species of sea turtle. We're ignoring the flatback, but that's because it doesn't live around here and it's not subject to this, but I just thought in case, we ought to just –

DR. LENT: Thank you.

Q: And there might be eight if you consider the East Pacific green turtle to be a separate turtle – the black turtle, which itself is in a lot of trouble. But let me – I digress.

DR. LENT: There are plenty of woes for turtles.

Q: How would you respond to the comment from some environmentalists that where have you been all this time? People are congratulating you for this move. Dr. Spotila at Drexel has been screaming in the environmental community and to the U.S. government for the better part of a decade about the leatherback turtle. Perhaps the analogy of the turtle and the hare is good here. It seems like the U.S. government is – this is maybe not too little but possibly too late.

This gentleman from the World Wildlife was talking – in Malaysia this past year, you're probably aware, there were two leatherback turtle nests – two. Twenty years ago there were 18,000. Where has the U.S. government been, and why did it take 10 years for you all to come up with changes in hooks? And I have a follow-up question.

DR. LENT: Okay, I'll get started but there are some folks who can probably help me out here.

The first thing I want to emphasize is that we have been working on the turtle issues for a long time. The TED issue has been around for – Bill, when was our first regulatory – 10 years ago?

DR. HOGARTH: Yes, 1987.

DR. LENT: Since 1987, TEDs have been in place, and that's where we have a lot of turtle interactions. So we definitely have been addressing it.

I have myself personally, in highly migratory species in the Pacific, shut down fisheries because of turtle interactions as long ago as five years. So it's not something new in terms of addressing the turtle issue. The nesting beach activity, I know there have been a number of projects on many fronts looking at nesting beaches. It's been difficult.

When we have new technology, when we have new information, we go about it as swiftly as we can -- some people say not fast enough. But if we swiftly put a regulation in place without doing our NEPA analysis, the National Environmental Policy Act, without doing our small business impact analysis, without doing cost-benefit, without doing Administrative Procedures Act, the rule will be bounced out in court with the flick of a pen. We have to take every single step. We also want -- we don't do that just for process; we do it because that's an important part of the regulatory process in the United States is getting all of the analyses out to all of the public, affected or not, getting the debate, having public hearings and having people provide their comments in writing and responding to those comments.

So, the regulatory process is burdensome but it's a necessary part of fisheries management and marine resource conservation. So, again, some people feel it's too slow. I know that folks feel that the new TED requirements, the larger TED requirements, took a long time, but that's because we had to go through every single step to make sure it stuck once it got in place. We are an agency that faces a lot of litigation, and we hate getting tripped up on process in court. We want to make sure we followed all the steps, that we have done it right.

Bill, do you want to add anything, or Scott?

DR. HOGARTH: The first problem we attempted to tackle was turtle bycatch in the shrimp industry. That's where most of the turtle takes were, that's where we had the most problems, and it took a lot of work. It's a matter of priorities and funds, as it is everywhere. A lot of work has been done in nesting beaches. That's something we haven't talked about here today, but internationally we're also working with Indonesia and some other countries on nesting beaches. We know that we can't just do it with technology gear. Some countries use turtles for cultural and religious activities. We have got to go through a new education process, and we're doing that. It's just a matter of taking it step by step, tackling the biggest problems first. Even with the longline fishery, we've got other gears we have to look at.

We have a turtle initiative now for the East Coast of the U.S., looking at all gears, all activities that affect turtles and turtle populations. So it's a matter of priorities, it's a matter of funding, not something we have overlooked. And we have used time/area closures and other fishery management tools to address the problem in the U.S. We have just found out we just can't do it alone. We are putting our fishermen at an unfair advantage and we're not going to save turtles. We're trying to look at a more global approach to turtle conservation.

Q: My follow up is, Dr. Spotila of Drexel, whom I'm sure you're aware of, has said that the Pacific leatherback will be extinct in 10 years if the trends that he has been monitoring continue. Now, I did a story on VOA three years ago, when he was quoted as saying that I would like to ask you specifically yes or no; from all of the U.S. government's expertise, do you think that you can – with these and whatever other things you have in the pipeline, do you think you can prevent the Pacific leatherback sea turtle from extinction in the next 10 years?

DR. LENT: Well, there's a lot we can do. I can't stand here today and guarantee you that we can prevent the extinction, but we are doing all that we can within our powers as a leader in these regional fishery management organizations, working on nesting beaches, doing all we can to address the mortality. We will continue our efforts both in terms of nesting beaches and in terms of fishing gear interactions and try to reverse this trend.

Q: One other question. You mentioned TEDs quite a bit. I just came back from Costa Rica six weeks ago and I can tell you that the environmental organizations down there are tearing their hair out because as environmentally sensitive as Costa Rica is, a lot of the shrimp fisheries are doing the same thing that the good old boys in Texas are doing, of which you are well aware. And that is when the Coast Guard's not around and the NOAA boats aren't around and the Texas Department of Natural Resources boats aren't around, well, my goodness, the TEDs have a line drawn through them and they're closed tighter than a drum. And then when the Coast Guard appears on the horizon, they pull out that line.

Now, the same thing is going on in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador from what I hear. That is to say, the countries are telling NOAA and the U.S. Department of Commerce that yes, we are abiding by the TED regulations, we have these trap doors, and we may even have the larger trap doors for the big loggerheads and the big greens. But the fact remains that the Costa Rican government has one coast guard boat. It's a 1947, I think, U.S. Coast Guard boat that they donated, for the whole coastline in Costa Rica.

Are we – is NOAA suggesting to the environmental community an unrealistic amount of cooperation not only with the TEDs, which – and I don't have to mention the fact that there's a lot of dead Ridleys washing up in Texas, where there are allegations that the Texas shrimpers are doing the same thing. But are you unrealistic about what you're announcing today with the fishermen in Asia about cooperation, or am I just maybe a little too cynical?

DR. LENT: Enforcement is an issue. It's always going to be an issue. And that's a matter of resources as well: how many boats, how much time and effort we can put into enforcement both at home and overseas. The important thing on the international front – two things I want to mention. We do participate in State Department inspection trips to go over and certify or decertify or certain countries, and in fact last year we actually took a country off the certified list, so we are serious about that. Second thing I want to mention is that our NOAA enforcement arm in NOAA Fisheries actually travels to countries to work with enforcement agents to give them tips and advice and training on TED enforcement, so we're trying our best to make some progress on that front. Bill, do you want to add anything?

DR. HOGARTH: Let me go back to the Pacific leatherbacks in 10 years. It is a challenge, but I do think that the public, not only in America, seems to rise to the challenge of a real issue like this, and I think we can do it. It's going to take more protection of nesting beaches. It's going to take more projects like this initiative we are announcing today.

We are aware of some of the things you're talking about in foreign countries. In fact, we're in Costa Rica again today, working on enforcement issues.

And our industry will be taking observers and there are other ways we have of monitoring our domestic fleet, and they know it. Most of the compliance we have seen in the Gulf on TEDs is running over 90 percent. We just made a huge case in Texas, probably what you're talking about, of four TEDs sewn together that had been on a month's fishing trip. Well, they're paying the price, a big price, and that word gets out. So you just have to make a few cases. But I am convinced that our industry, you give them technology that's realistic, most of them will work with it, and that's the faith I have.

DR. LENT: Is there anyone else who wants to answer that?

MR. BEIDEMAN: A couple of things. As far as these hooks and pelagic longlining, I think enforcement would be rather simple. Once these hooks are required, I don't see the need for other types of hooks on the boat. So it's a little bit different than the TED situation. But as far as what – from my perspective, what I see happening is that, you know, we have relatively healthy sea turtle stocks on U.S. shores, and still that's not good enough for us. We want them at, you know, robust, and that's okay. And we're just collectively starting to realize that we can't get there. We can't get there, and it has taken, you know, a massive, you know, leadership to stand up and be willing to put into the issue what it will take, and that has been Bill Hogarth with a shared vision that even if we shut down all U.S. fisheries that interact with turtles, we won't be saving turtles. We have to reach the international fleets in order to be effective.

DR. LENT: – Follow up question.

Q: I just wanted to ask a question while you are there. I haven't heard anything about nylon filament lines here. What about the issue of biodegradable lines? I'm sure you're aware that, aside from these hooks, some of these nets break loose and go traveling around the world, catching everything, and they don't belong to anybody. Nobody knows what country they're from, and they just keep going because they're not biodegradable. I haven't heard a word today about possibly switching to filament lines that are going to eventually dissolve so that they don't keep catching turtles into the next century.

MR. BEIDEMAN: These aren't nets. These are hook and line. So once the bait is off of that hook, it stops fishing, essentially. These hook and lines are pretty much retrieved on a daily basis. There are times when gear gets lost, and that gear basically wraps up into a ball and sinks to the bottom. And that's unfortunate, but it is relatively rare.

DR. LENT: Scott, do you have a follow up?

MR. BURNS: Yes, this is in response to Andrew's, I guess, second question. As difficult a challenge as we face, I think we have to operate based on the assumption that we can save these animals, that we can prevent the extinction of the leatherback and we can rebuild these populations because what's the alternative? You know, clearly we would have been better off if all the nations of the world and fishing fleets and the other actors who have contributed to the decline of these populations had acted sooner, but I think we need to try to figure out what is it we can do today to address this challenge and to reverse it. And I think in the case of this one piece of the puzzle, the long-line fisheries, what we see in these experiments is a result that ought to be attractive to other fleets around the world.

In Ecuador, where we're working right now, it's estimated that there are 15,000 boats, many of them very small vessels essentially beyond the reach of enforcement. So the challenge of reaching out to those communities and getting them to adopt new technologies isn't a small one, but in this case we think, given the enthusiastic response that I know NOAA and the other workshop participants have received, is that there is a real interest in this, and that if we can demonstrate that their catches will remain stable or even increase, they will take this on board and do it. There are other challenges that we face as well: protecting nesting beaches, protecting other ocean areas that serve as critical habitat or congregation points for turtles, and also addressing problems in other types of fisheries like, I guess, the gillnet fisheries that you're alluding to, where the dimension of the problem is relatively unknown and the solutions – potential solutions haven't been explored as much. But this is a really important piece of the puzzle, and I think it's one that we can move forward with and hopefully make some progress with in the short term.

DR. LENT: This will be our last question.

Q: Mike Burnham again from Greenwire. I would like to include in my story what the cost of outfitting a boat would be. Did the study include that?

DR. LENT: Nelson, do you want to – or Gail?

MR. BEIDEMAN: The study has included that, and the specifics are available on the NED website. But just roughly off the top of my head it's around a thousand, \$1,200. We have been very, very fortunate to have companies that make these type of devices working with us every step of the way, and we have actually had a circumstance where a captain comes up with a new idea, a new little twist or wrinkle in it, and by the next trip of the fleet everybody's outfitted with a protocol to start testing it.

Shawn Dick from Aquatic Release Conservation has designed most of this equipment, based on ideas from our captains. As partners we worked together to get the equipment as quickly and as correct as possible, fine-tuning along the line. You'll want to see Shawn about the pricing of equipment, but it's approximately \$1,200.

Q: That's per vessel?

MR. BEIDEMAN: Per vessel.

Q: And that's in addition to what they would now pay to outfit the boat?

MR. BEIDEMAN: Well, actually some of these vessels are already starting to put some of this equipment on their own, so that would be a deduction. That would be the high end.

DR. LENT: Thanks, Nelson. And again, we will have some of the economic analyses and the regulatory documents that will be coming out in the next few months. Okay, well, I guess we just want to say thank you very much for coming today, and again, folks will stick around if you have any questions for specific individuals. Thank you very much.

(End of event.)