

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Sea Turtle Late-Term Nest Collection and Hatchling Release Plan Frequently Asked Questions

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Q: What are you doing to plan for oil spill impacts to sea turtle nests along the northern Gulf Coast?

A: All sea turtle nests laid along the northern Gulf coast are being visibly marked to ensure that nests are not harmed during oil spill cleanup operations that may be undertaken on these beaches. In addition, a sea turtle late-term nest collection and hatchling release plan specifically developed for the response to the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill is being implemented to provide the best possible protection for sea turtle hatchlings from nests in Alabama and the Florida panhandle.

Q: Who developed the plan and protocols?

A: The plan was developed by sea turtle experts with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) in consultation with numerous sea turtle scientific experts and review of the available literature.

Q: What do the plan and protocols do?

A: The plan takes a proactive approach toward minimizing the anticipated oil-spill impacts by ensuring nests are marked in a manner that will prevent damage from beach clean-up operations and by coordinating the collection of nests at a point in the incubation cycle where transport of the incubating eggs is less likely to result in the loss of viable eggs. These nests will be handled under a very strict protocol, packed in specially prepared Styrofoam boxes, and then transported to the east coast of Florida. Once there, the nests will be held in a secure, climate controlled facility until incubation is complete. As hatchlings emerge, they will be collected each night and transported and released on an east central Florida beach where they will be allowed to make their way to the ocean.

Q: How many nest or hatchlings are estimated to be in the plan's target area?

A: In the northern Gulf area, approximately 700 nests are laid annually in the Florida Panhandle and up to 80 nests are laid annually in Alabama. Most nests are made by loggerhead sea turtles; however, some Kemp's ridley, green, and leatherback turtle nests have also been documented. Hatchlings begin emerging from nests in early to mid-July. In 2010, approximately 50,000 hatchlings are anticipated to be produced from northern Gulf sea turtle nests.

Q: How do you know which nests to relocate?

A: Trained and permitted sea turtle nest surveyors are conducting surveys daily. As new nests are found they are flagged, dated, and logged, and GPS coordinates are taken and entered into a central database. Collection of nests during the end of the incubation period can then be timed based on this information and ongoing monitoring.

Q: Are there sufficient resources available to implement the plan?

A: There are sufficient resources to fully implement the plan. However, the implementation of this plan requires a significant coordinated effort by all agencies and partners over an approximately four month period that must be sustained to accomplish the goals.

Q: What are your expectations of success?

A: In developing this plan we realized early that our expectations for success must be rooted in the knowledge that doing nothing would most likely result in the loss of most, if not all, of this year's northern Gulf of Mexico hatchling cohort. Translocating such a large number of nests late in incubation has never been attempted, and some additional mortality beyond natural levels must be expected. However, translocating these nests will give the greatest number of hatchlings the best opportunity to survive and contribute to the ongoing recovery of their species.

Q: Are there risks to the eggs and hatchlings associated with this plan?

A: The plan is not without risks. While these risks may not be supportable under normal conditions, the current situation in the Gulf of Mexico requires that we take extraordinary measures and associated risks to prevent the possible loss of the entire 2010 cohort of hatchlings produced on northern Gulf beaches.

The protocols were developed with careful consideration and examination of all relevant scientific information, consultation with experts, and balanced with the logistical requirements of collecting and translocating some 700-800 nests from the northern Gulf to the Atlantic. They involve significant manipulation of eggs and hatchlings and are accompanied by definite, but unquantifiable risks.

Q: Is releasing the hatchlings on the east coast a problem for the hatchlings?

A: Careful review of existing scientific literature and discussions with experts suggest that some portion of loggerheads produced on northern Gulf beaches are transported naturally into the Atlantic by currents. The plan by-passes a portion of this passive migration process and places the hatchlings in a safer environment for their growth and development.

Q: Are you going to develop and implement similar plans for nesting beaches along Florida's southwest coast? If not, why?

A: This plan applies to nests deposited on Florida Panhandle and Alabama beaches during the 2010 nesting season only. We do not intend to implement these protocols elsewhere or in future years in this area.

The 2010 cohort in the northern Gulf area is at the highest risk for encountering oil after entering the ocean.

Based on what is known to date regarding the projected path of the oil spill, and our understanding of movement of hatchlings emerging from nests laid on southwest Florida beaches we believe the threat to hatchlings emerging from nests along this coastline is not likely to result in loss of the entire 2010 hatchling cohort. In addition, the loggerhead turtles produced on southwest Florida beaches are part of a larger subpopulation that also nests on

Florida's Atlantic Coast beaches and, therefore, the likelihood that all or a significant portion of the 2010 cohort of this nesting subpopulation would be lost is highly improbable.

Q: The spill is still not under control or stopped. What if the threats become greater?

A: We are constantly monitoring the situation and should things change we are prepared to consider additional options.

Q: Where can I find the plan?

A: The plan is available on-line at <http://www.fws.gov/northflorida> under the Emergency Section 7 consultation link.

Q: What can I do to help?

A: If you observe or find a sea turtle that appears oiled or injured, please immediately call 1-866-557-1401. Individuals are urged not to attempt to help injured or oiled sea turtles, but to report the sightings to the toll-free number. If you are interested in volunteering to aid in the recovery effort, call 1-866-448-5816. Four Gulf-coast states have also setup websites for volunteers; those are available at our website at <http://www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill/whatyou.html>.

Q: Can I donate money to help in the sea turtle oil-spill response?

A: Please review the [information on the state volunteer websites](#) for information on donating funds for wildlife oil-spill response.