

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 7918

Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022

H.R. 7918 would establish a grant program to provide funding support to the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (Network). The bill authorizes \$5 million for the program, to provide financial assistance to organizations for response to stranded sea turtles, rehabilitation, mortality investigation, facilities costs, and costs associated with data collection and data management. The Department of Commerce supports the creation of this grant program as it would greatly benefit the members of the Network and would help support recovery of endangered and threatened sea turtles. DOC would not be able to implement or administer the grant program without additional appropriations.

All sea turtles that occur in U.S. waters are listed as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). To advance the conservation and recovery of listed sea turtles, each sea turtle recovery plan developed jointly by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identifies and highlights the need to maintain an active stranding network. As a result, the Network was formally established by NMFS in 1980 to document sea turtle strandings along the coastal areas from Maine to Texas and in portions of the U.S. Caribbean. The Network is a cooperative effort among Federal, State, and permitted private partners working to inform causes of morbidity and mortality by responding to and documenting stranded sea turtles, in a manner sufficient to inform conservation management and recovery. While NMFS coordinates the Network, the participating local organizations respond to most stranded turtles to collect scientific data and to transport sick and injured turtles to rehabilitation facilities. NMFS currently has minimal funding to provide federal financial support to these stranding organizations NMFS has provided some funding over the past five years (approximately \$190K in FY22) to support the Network for specific stranding events (i.e., cold stun events) and some states have received Species Recovery Grants to support their Network member, but the turtle stranding network does not have a direct funding source similar to the Prescott Grant Program for marine mammals.

The John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program, under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, has proven to be a successful model for providing additional support to marine mammal stranding network organizations for response, rehabilitation, and data collection through a competitive annual program. Participants of the Network are not eligible for those

funds for sea turtle stranding response. A separate grant program, under the ESA, to support the Network would provide much-needed resources to organizations that help respond to stranded sea turtles.

Sea Turtle Strandings

Sea turtle strandings fall into two general categories: (1) non-cold stun strandings (the most common type that occur year-round) and (2) cold-stunned strandings (mass events with a known and predictable cause of cold weather). Over the past two decades, annual non-cold stun strandings in the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico averaged just over 3,000 turtles per year. The vast majority of these non-cold stunned stranded sea turtles die at sea before stranding. On average, 84% strand dead and 16% strand alive. The number of turtles affected by cold-stunning has increased over recent years. Cold-stunning is now common in New England, averaging a few hundred turtles rescued each year, and in some years over a thousand. In the southeast U.S., primarily Florida and Texas, mass cold stunning events do not occur every year, but when they occur these events can affect thousands of turtles. While factors contributing to the frequency and size of cold stun events are not fully understood, recent research in the northeastern U.S. suggests that warming sea temperature may be influencing sea turtle movements in a way that increases the chances of cold-stunning. Mass cold-stunning events require a large response effort and survival rates are dependent on the extent and duration of the cold weather/storm event(s).

Sea turtle conservation and recovery are dependent on reducing the primary threats that sea turtles face, which are overwhelmingly human-caused. Identifying, documenting, and improving our understanding of these threats is central to developing solutions to reduce them. Monitoring and documenting strandings assists in our understanding of mortality factors. The number of stranded turtles that are cared for by rehabilitation facilities is small compared to those that die from threats at sea. Caring for live stranded turtles provides valuable educational opportunities that can benefit recovery efforts and fulfills societal expectations for humane care; however, it is not a replacement for reduction of threats which is the primary route to population recovery.

DOC supports the creation of the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022, under the ESA, as it would help support recovery and conservation of endangered and threatened sea turtles.