

THE SACRAMENTO BEE



Viewpoints: Feds must end 'walls of death' net fishing

By Geoff Shester

Special to The Bee

Published: Friday, Mar. 9, 2012 | Page 13A



Geoff Shester

No matter how many times we may think we've secured better ocean management practices, some bad ones just keep coming back. One of these is the most damaging activity to the open ocean ecosystem off the [California coast](#) – drift gill netting.

After a series of failed attempts, the federal government met in Sacramento last Saturday and moved forward with another attempt to expand drift gill netting and pursue a new longline fishery for swordfish. This effort not only threatens this fishery, but the future of California's marine life.

Nowadays, Pacific swordfish are primarily caught off California with drift gill nets. Commonly referred to as "walls of death," drift gill nets can be over a mile long, catching many large open-ocean swimmers that cross their path, including whales, dolphins, [sea turtles](#), sharks, and other fish.

A recent report by the [National Marine Fisheries Service](#) estimated that in 2010, the swordfish drift-net fishery killed 49 dolphins and 16 endangered sperm whales. Furthermore, only 12 percent of the fishing activity at sea was observed through the government's observer program; therefore, these numbers could actually be much greater.

In 2009, more than six ocean sunfish were caught and discarded for every swordfish caught, as well as hundreds of blue sharks. This level of wasteful bycatch of marine life is simply unacceptable.

In 2007, the [California Coastal Commission](#) unanimously opposed expansion of the drift gill net fishery. Oregon and Washington now have laws on the books banning the use of drift gill nets by their fishermen, leaving California as the only West Coast state still using this devastating [fishing gear](#).

Drift gill nets have even been banned on the high seas by the [United Nations](#) (beyond 200 miles offshore).

Pelagic longlines are no less problematic, as they also result in the unintended killing of [marine mammals](#), turtles, sharks, and other fish. Two decades ago, the [California Department of Fish and Game](#) banned all pelagic longline fishing off California due to its adverse impacts on marine life.

In Hawaii, the pelagic longline fishery was shut down last year because they exceeded their take of sea turtles.

Based on recent data, NMFS has indicated that the [California coast](#) is more important to endangered sea turtle populations than previously thought. In the last six months the North Pacific loggerhead was moved from threatened to the more serious endangered under the [Endangered Species Act](#), and the Central [California coast](#) was designated critical habitat for endangered leatherbacks for its global importance as a feeding hotspot for these ancient creatures.

Now is not the time to be removing measures in place to protect sea turtles; if anything these turtles need more help than ever to avoid becoming extinct due to human activity.

The government's basic argument to increase this fishery is that if we kill more turtles and marine mammals here at home, fewer will die abroad. There is absolutely no evidence to support this claim, as there is no connection between domestic and foreign swordfish production.

NMFS has the legal authority to regulate swordfish imports under existing law, but has failed to do so. Simply put, expanding a dirty fishery here isn't going to clean up dirty fisheries elsewhere. The fact that other countries don't have strong enough regulations doesn't relieve our obligation to operate clean fisheries under our national laws.

In addition, [U.S. demand](#) for swordfish has actually been declining, likely as a result of FDA warnings regarding high levels of mercury in the fish.

By again proposing this egregious expansion, the federal government is wasting [taxpayer money](#) to promote a harmful activity that has been repeatedly rejected by California decision-makers. Rather than expanding this truly unsustainable fishery, Oceana and other conservation organizations are asking the federal government to phase it out altogether and expand more sustainable methods.

Swordfish historically was caught off California using harpoons, a method that has no incidental bycatch and brings in a much higher price per pound of swordfish. However, drift nets largely replaced this fishery when they arrived on the scene several decades ago.

In addition to harpoons, there are other sustainable ways to catch swordfish.

Expanding use of the most wasteful fishing method is not the way to ensure healthy oceans and productive, sustainable fisheries that make California such a great place to live

Geoff Shester is the California program director of Oceana, a marine conservation group with a regional office in Monterey.