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## NOAA lists five Atlantic sturgeon populations under Endangered Species Act

January 31, 2012

NOAA's Fisheries Service announced today a final decision to list five **distinct population segments** of Atlantic sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act. The Chesapeake Bay, New York Bight, Carolina, and South Atlantic populations of Atlantic sturgeon will be listed as endangered, while the Gulf of Maine population will be listed as threatened.

It has been illegal to fish for, catch or keep Atlantic sturgeon for more than a decade. The listing decisions will not have an immediate effect on fishing. NOAA will work with fishery management councils, interstate fisheries managers, state agencies, and the fishing industry to find ways to further reduce bycatch of Atlantic sturgeon in federal and state waters without unduly hampering fishing activities. For example, NOAA continues to fund research to test modifications to fishing gear that can reduce bycatch of fish, including Atlantic sturgeon.

A team of biologists from NOAA, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed a formal **status review** for Atlantic sturgeon in 2007. The review indicated populations of Atlantic sturgeon remain far below historical levels.

In the Delaware River before 1890, there were an estimated 180,000 adult females spawning, and now the total spawning adults in that river is believed to number fewer than 300.

Atlantic sturgeon are large, slow-growing, late-maturing, long-lived, estuary-dependent fish that live the majority of their lives in salt water, but hatch and spawn in freshwater. Historical catch records indicate that these fish were once abundant, supporting important colonial fisheries. In the late 19th century, demand grew for sturgeon caviar and the first major U.S. commercial fishery for them developed. This lasted from about 1870 until the 1950s with landings peaking in 1890. The commercial fishery collapsed in 1901 when landings were about 10 percent of the peak. Landings by fisheries targeting sturgeon declined to even less in subsequent years, with that trend persisting until moratoria on landings were established.

While the historic range of Atlantic sturgeon included major estuary and river systems from Labrador to Florida, Atlantic sturgeon are now thought to be absent from at least 14 rivers they used historically, with spawning thought to occur in only 20 of 38 known historic spawning rivers.

The most significant threats to the species are unintended catch of Atlantic sturgeon in some fisheries; dams that block access to spawning areas, poor water quality, which harms development of sturgeon larvae and juveniles; dredging of historical spawning areas; and vessel strikes. As a result, NOAA Fisheries determined that listing sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act is warranted.

In October 2009, NOAA received a petition to list Atlantic sturgeon as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. In January 2010, NOAA **announced** the petition had merit and it would formally consider whether to list the species under the Endangered Species Act.

In October 2010, NOAA **proposed** listing the species and sought public comment. NOAA received comments from 119 individuals or agencies, which were submitted in writing or during the six public meetings. While some comments opposed listing the species, no data was provided that conflicted with today's final decision to list Atlantic sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act. The final listing decision is consistent with the proposed listing.

To make this decision, NOAA first reviewed the best scientific and commercial data available, including recent information on commercial and recreational bycatch rates and effects of poor water quality on Atlantic sturgeon, and additional information submitted during the comment period. An eleven-member team of Atlantic sturgeon experts from NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service drafted a status review report. Eight state and regional Atlantic sturgeon biologists reviewed and contributed information to the report, and the report was independently peer-reviewed by six other Atlantic sturgeon experts. NOAA's proposed rule to list the five Atlantic sturgeon populations was submitted to three independent peer reviewers. Public comments on the proposed rule were accepted through a 120-day public comment period, which included six public hearings NOAA voluntarily convened to solicit public opinion on the proposed listing. NOAA considered all comments, including any data or information supplied, prior to making a final decision that also reflects current science, regulations, case law, and agency guidance.

The Endangered Species Act requires species listed as endangered to receive the full protection under the Act to prevent extinction, including a prohibition against "take," which includes harassing, harming, pursuing, wounding, killing, trapping, capturing, or collecting. These protections may also be established for threatened species to prevent them from becoming endangered.

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This listing is scheduled to file in the Federal Register on Feb. 3, publish on Feb. 6, and become effective April 6, 2012.

Questions about this listing can be directed to Jonathan Shannon, [jonathan.shannon@noaa.gov](mailto:jonathan.shannon@noaa.gov).



Atlantic sturgeon photo courtesy of Robert Michelson

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