

Terms of Reference
Low Profile Groundline Workshops
September 2005

Background and Need

Large whales can be seriously injured or killed by entanglement in fishing gear used in the water off the eastern United States. Entanglement can involve floating rope or lines used to connect pots/traps along the ocean bottom (i.e. groundline). One modification to reduce entanglement in groundline is to lower the profile of groundline to the ocean bottom through the use of sinking/neutrally buoyant line. An alternative gear modification that has been suggested is lowering the profile of groundline to a specified height above the ocean bottom in certain rock, coral or wreck areas where sinking/neutrally buoyant line has been reported to be operationally infeasible.

NMFS and others are presently researching “low profile” groundline issues. Further information is needed on various aspects including what is known about prey distribution, as well as large whale distribution and behaviour, to help assist in discussions regarding “low profile” groundline. Further specifics are needed on areas and circumstances that make the use of sinking/neutrally buoyant groundline not operationally feasible. Research updates and suggestions on the methods for reducing the profile of groundline are also needed. NMFS has stated previously that considerations for “low profile” line would need to include an enforceable definition that is operationally feasible for fishermen, and which reduces risk of entanglement if this is to be considered as a gear modification.

Goals and Objective:

NMFS will conduct a series of fact finding/scoping workshops along the East Coast to identify:

1. Areas where low profile groundline should be considered;
2. Appropriate height above the ocean bottom (based primarily on bottom type, but will include the limited information available on whale behavior);
3. Techniques to modify groundline;
4. Gear marking options for low profile areas; and
5. Contingency plan ideas in the event of an entanglement occurs in low profile groundline.

The current knowledge of large whale (right, humpback and fin) ecology (including foraging and diving behavior), prey, habitat and oceanography in various areas will be discussed in the context of low profile groundline. A proxy height for specific areas will be discussed until large whale ecology information is available to further refine the concept of low profile groundline. These workshops will be information gathering whereby information, ideas or recommendations from individual participants and the public will be provided. Summaries from these meetings will be provided to the Atlantic Large Whale

Take Reduction Team (ALWTRT). The ALWTRT has discussed low profile at the last three meetings and further discussions are planned for the fall of 2005. All meeting summaries will be provided to the ALWTRT Regional Subgroups in the fall of 2005 to assist further low profile discussion. The information will also be discussed at the full ALWTRT meeting in 2006.

Species:

Focus on the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (ALWTRP) large whale species of concern: right, humpback and fin whales. Minke whales will be noted. Consider all the major large whales to ensure that what may be sufficient for one species will also be sufficient (and not negatively impact) another large whale species.

Areas of Consideration for Low Profile:

ALWTRP regulated waters. As low profile is an issue that constituents in many states along the east coast have asked NMFS to consider, coastwide scoping/fact finding meetings are being conducted through region-specific meetings.

Fisheries:

Trap/pot only. NMFS will provide summaries of the workshops to the ALWTRT for future discussion including whether a low profile groundline option should be considered for gillnet fisheries. If so, information obtained from these workshops will be useful and applicable for these ALWTRT discussions.