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Groups File Suit to Stop Development in Critical Sea Turtle Habitat

As the BP oil spill continues to imperil threatened and endangered sea turtles in the Gulf, NWF and FWF fight to protect key turtle habitat along Florida coast

Washington, DC – The National Wildlife Federation and Florida Wildlife Federation today filed a lawsuit in federal court in Miami, FL against the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for failing to protect endangered sea turtles from the impacts of its National Flood Insurance Program, which promotes development in vital sea turtle habitat.

Sea turtles have been increasingly imperiled by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As of July 12, 457 dead sea turtles have been collected within the oil spill area. NWF experts say many more have likely been killed or injured but not found.

“Countless numbers of sea turtles are being poisoned and killed by the spill in the Gulf,” said Manley Fuller, Florida Wildlife Federation president. “If we hope to give these majestic animals a fighting chance, it is imperative that we protect what remains of their nesting habitat along the Florida coast.”

Ninety-percent of all sea turtle nesting in the U.S. takes place on Florida’s beaches, including loggerhead, green, hawksbill, and leatherbacks. Inappropriately sited coastal development on the frontal dunes of eroding beaches can significantly impact sea turtles by:

- discouraging females attempting to nest,
- disorienting hatchlings trying to reach the ocean, and
- interfering with beach processes.

Nevertheless, public subsidies – including federal flood insurance – continue to encourage development along Florida’s most sensitive beach habitats. According to the suit, issuing flood insurance without first determining whether the development will harm endangered species or their habitat, and then designing measures to avoid such harm, violates the Endangered Species Act.

“If you want to build a house or business, you have options where to put it. Wildlife does not have that choice,” said John Kostyack, Executive Director of Wildlife Conservation and Global

Warming at National Wildlife Federation. “Sea turtles almost always return to the same beach where they were hatched to lay their eggs. By subsidizing development along coastal areas, FEMA is putting these nesting sites at risk, potentially breaking a cycle that has been going on for generations.”

Because many private insurers refuse to insure homes in storm surge areas, FEMA’s insurance program allows development to occur where it otherwise would not. FEMA also sets eligibility rules for communities that want to participate in the flood insurance program - rules that currently fail to limit development in high-risk floodplains and fail to consider the impacts of development on environmentally sensitive lands. As part of their lawsuit, the National Wildlife Federation and Florida Wildlife Federation are seeking a ruling that would require FEMA to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the effects of its flood insurance program.

[National Wildlife Federation](#) is America’s conservation organization, inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children’s future.

[The Florida Wildlife Federation](#) is a private, statewide, non-profit citizens’ conservation education organization composed of thousands of concerned Floridians and other citizens from all walks of life who have a common interest in preserving, managing, and improving Florida’s fish, wildlife, soil, water, and plant life.

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