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Scientists Release the First Rescued, Rehabilitated Sea Turtles Back into the Gulf

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NOAA administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco and Adm. Thad Allen joined state, federal, and partner biologists today as they released 23 Kemp's ridley sea turtles back into the Gulf of Mexico near Cedar Key, Fla., after the turtles were successfully rescued and rehabilitated from the effects of the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill.

Scientists selected the area on Florida's Gulf coast for release because it is an important foraging area for the species, the water was never oiled, and the habitat provides everything these turtles need for survival.

"I'm pleased that Admiral Allen and I were able to assist with the release of these turtles. And we thank all of our partners in this rescue and rehabilitation effort," said Dr. Lubchenco. "This is a wonderful day for all involved--but especially for the turtles."

"This area near Cedar Key provides excellent habitat for Kemp's ridley sea turtles and has long been known as an important habitat area for this species," said Barbara Schroeder, NOAA's national sea turtle coordinator. "Thanks to the efforts of our rescue teams and rehabilitation facility partners all of the turtles we released today have an excellent chance of surviving in the wild and contributing to the recovery of this species."

The turtles released today were rescued by teams from NOAA and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission working with partners from the Riverhead Foundation and the In-Water Research Group. The turtles received excellent

treatment and care, including cleaning and de-oiling, at the Audubon Aquarium in New Orleans, and at Gulf World in Panama City, Fla. The turtles were then cared for by SeaWorld Orlando, Mote Marine Laboratory, and the Florida Aquarium. To date, approximately 500 live turtles have been rescued during the Gulf oil spill, and more than 450 stranded or captured turtles have had visible evidence of external oil. Approximately 350 turtles are still in rehabilitation facilities and will be released as they are given clean bills of health.

“It’s wonderful news that sea turtles hurt by the Deepwater Horizon spill are now rehabilitated and ready to go home to the Gulf of Mexico,” said Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida. “This is a testament to the hard work of fish and wildlife agencies and our wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centers.”

”This is a great day for our biologists since many of these turtles were originally rescued by our staff,” said Gil McRae, director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. “Everyone involved has worked hard to ensure that these endangered turtles are returned to the wild so they can contribute to the overall population.”

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For more information on FWC sea turtle conservation, visit <http://www.MyFWC.com/SeaTurtle>.