

## Some 70,000 turtle eggs to be whisked far from oil

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In this June 10, 2010 file photo, a Kemp's ridley sea turtle is lifted back to its temporary tank after being weighed, getting its heartbeat and temperature taken, and getting a shot of antibiotics at the Audubon Nature Institute's Aquatic Center in New Orleans. An effort to save thousands of sea turtle hatchlings from dying in the oily Gulf of Mexico will begin in the coming weeks in a desperate attempt to keep an entire generation of threatened species from vanishing. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey, File)

(AP) -- An effort to save thousands of sea turtle hatchlings from dying in the oily Gulf of Mexico will begin in the coming weeks in a desperate attempt to keep an entire generation of threatened species from vanishing.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will coordinate the plan, which calls for collecting about 70,000 turtle eggs in up to 800 nests buried in the sand across Florida Panhandle and Alabama beaches.

It's never been done on such a massive scale. But doing nothing, experts

say, could lead to unprecedented deaths. There are fears the [turtles](#) would be coated in oil and poisoned by crude-soaked food.

"This is an extraordinary effort under extraordinary conditions, but if we can save some of the hatchlings, it will be worth it as opposed to losing all of them," said Chuck Underwood of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We have a much higher degree of certainty that if we do nothing and we allow these turtles to emerge and go into the Gulf and into the oil ... that we could in fact lose most of them, if not all of them," he added. "There's a chance of losing a whole generation."

Dozens of workers are fanned out across the coast marking turtle nests, most of them threatened loggerheads, which nest largely along Florida Panhandle and Alabama beaches.

In about 10 days, they will begin the arduous process of excavating the nests, mostly by hand. The digging must be slow and delicate - aside from making sure the shells don't crack, the eggs can't be rolled around or repositioned to protect the embryo inside.

Then the eggs will be carefully placed in specially designed Styrofoam containers, like coolers, along with sand and moisture to mimic the natural nest. The containers will then be trucked about 500 miles east to a temperature-controlled warehouse at Florida's Kennedy Space Center.

There, the eggs will remain until hatchlings emerge, and they will be placed one-by-one on Florida's east coast, where the turtles can swim oil-free into the Atlantic Ocean.

"There's a whole lot of unknowns in what we're doing," Underwood acknowledged, noting many of the hatchlings could die anyway because

of the stressful moving process.

All of the [sea turtles](#) that venture into Gulf waters have already suffered because of commercial fishing and habitat loss. Endangered Kemp's ridleys, which are nesting on beaches in Mexico and Texas, have washed up by the dozens dead along Gulf beaches since the April 20 Deepwater Horizon rig explosion that has gushed up to 130 million gallons of oil into the sea.

While some have been found oiled, it remains unclear how many of them died because of it. Tests are ongoing. The Kemp's ridleys aren't in as immediate of danger because oil hasn't been washing ashore yet in their nesting places in the western Gulf. But some fear those hatchlings also could eventually make it into the crude.

Threatened loggerheads, which are currently being considered for the added protection of endangered status, also have been found oiled and dead since the spill started, along with leatherbacks and green turtles.

David Godfrey, executive director of the Gainesville, Fla.-based Sea Turtle Conservancy, agrees this plan is the only option to save as many turtles as possible.

He said if left alone, the turtles will soon begin emerging from their nests and heading straight out to sea to feed in masses of oil-soaked seaweed.

Even more unusual, in a field that typically sees division between government entities and conservationists, there is agreement on what to do. Teri Shore, program director with the California-based Sea Turtle Restoration Project, said she thought the plan was good given the circumstances.

"If those sea turtles swim out to the Gulf, they're going to face a massive oil slick which will cause them to perish or at least significantly decrease their chances of survival," she said.

Godfrey said he agreed with the strategy and called it a "pretty amazing plan" because conservationists rarely support relocating sea turtle nests. They often push for a change in human behaviors, such as dimming lights along beaches at night to avoid disorienting them.

But no one can control the oil, he noted.

"We're talking about allowing the entire year's class of hatchlings to emerge and swim to their certain doom, and are we just going to sit back and let that happen?" he said. "We just can't."

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