

# Sea turtles rescued from Gulf spill released

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This July 10, 2010 photo released by NASA shows the first group of hatchlings from endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle eggs brought from beaches along the Gulf Coast being released into the Atlantic Ocean off NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The effort is part of a plan to pluck some 70,000 eggs from nests on Alabama and Florida beaches before they hatch and swim out into the oil from the April 20 rig explosion off Louisiana. (AP Photo/NASA, Kim Shiflett) EDS NOTE: PHOTOS TAKEN WITH A RED FILTER ON LIGHT AND CAMERA TO PROTECT THE HATCHLINGS; EDITORIAL USE ONLY

(AP) -- The first group of sea turtles that are part of a sweeping effort to save threatened and endangered hatchlings from death in the oily Gulf of Mexico have been released into the Atlantic Ocean.

Fifty-six endangered Kemp's ridley turtles were released on a beach at Florida's Canaveral National Seashore this week, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said Thursday.

Sixty-seven eggs were collected from a nest along the Florida Panhandle on June 26 and brought to a temperature-controlled warehouse at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, but only the 56 hatched. State and federal officials plan to bring thousands more eggs for incubation in the coming months.

It is part of an overall plan to pluck some 70,000 eggs from sea turtle nests on beaches across Alabama and Florida before they hatch and swim out into the oil from the April 20 Deepwater Horizon rig explosion off Louisiana. NASA currently has about 1,100 eggs at the space center site incubating.

Scientists fear that if left alone, the hatchlings would most likely die in the crude, killing off an entire generation of an already imperiled species.

Most of the turtle eggs being collected are threatened loggerheads, but some are also Kemps ridleys, which nest largely in Mexico and southern Texas. Some, however, lay their eggs along the northern Gulf Coast.

Scientists acknowledge the plan is risky and that many of the hatchlings may die anyway from the stress of being moved, but all agree there is no better option.

David Godfrey, executive director of the Florida-based Sea Turtle Conservancy, said the first successful release of hatchlings brings hope that more will survive.

"It definitely shows that we're on the right track," Godfrey said Thursday.

Florida wildlife officials are hopeful, but remain cautious.

"It's just too early to tell," said the FWC's Patricia Behnke. "It gave them some hope, but it's not enough data to make an overall assessment of how it's going to go."

After the 1979 Ixtoc oil spill in the Gulf, several hundred Kemp's ridley hatchlings were ferried by helicopter to open ocean beyond the slick. But there has never been an effort to save so many sea turtle eggs.

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