

# The Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022

*Lead Senate Sponsors: Senator Edward Markey (D-MA)*

*Senator John Cornyn (R-TX)*

*Lead House Sponsor: Congressman William Keating (D-MA-9)*

## **Background**

All known sea turtle species within U.S. waters are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Sea turtles are facing a growing number of threats due to climate change and the proliferation of single-use plastics, as well as additional risks from ocean industrialization. These factors have led to an increase in strandings, where turtles are incapacitated in the water or on land and need intervention in order to survive, and prompted the need for a robust federal sea turtle rescue and assistance program.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) defines a sea turtle stranding as a sea turtle that is found either dead or alive, washed ashore or floating, but is unable to exhibit normal behavior due to an injury, illness, or other problems. There are multiple causes of sea turtle strandings in the United States. Many strandings are a result of human activities, including capture in fishing gear, vessel strikes, and entanglement in marine debris. There are also strandings that are caused by environmental factors, such as cold stunning or nervous system damage from toxic red algae during a red tide event. For example, the 2021 cold snap in Texas caused the largest sea turtle “cold-stun” event in recorded history, with 12,155 cold-stunned turtles recorded on the Texas coast in that one storm alone. While rescuers were able to return around 4,000 recovered turtles to the environment, only 35 percent of all the catalogued turtles survived the cold stun event.

To advance the conservation and recovery of these species, the sea turtle recovery plans developed by NOAA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) require the maintenance of active stranding networks in regions across the United States. Organizations that make up the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (STSSN) are facing increasing demands to respond and rehabilitate federally protected sea turtles, but there is not enough funding to effectively support this work. The Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act would address that gap by creating a new grant program, funded at \$5 million per year for the next five fiscal years, to address that gap and support these efforts.

## **Summary**

The Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act establishes a new grant program to fund the rescue, recovery, and treatment of stranded marine turtles. The program will also support the collection of data and samples from stranded marine turtles for scientific research or assessments of marine turtle health.

Specifically, the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022:

- Creates a new grant program at the Department of Commerce to fund rescue, recovery and research of sea turtles in the U.S., and authorize \$5 million annually from 2023 – 2028 in new funding.
- Specifies that the Secretary, in consultation with the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, develop criteria for awarding grants and provide such criteria for formal public notice and comment.
- Requires that the Secretary, in consultation with the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, provide opportunities for engagement with representatives from stakeholder.
- Directs the Secretary of Commerce to prioritize applicants with an established record of rescuing, rehabilitation, scientific research, and forensic science with respect to stranded marine turtles or conducting scientific research and forensic science on stranded marine turtles.