

Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act

Background:

- Beginning in the 1980s, Congress enacted legislation to curtail the practice of harmful “large scale driftnetting” by ending the domestic use of driftnets longer than approximately 1.5 miles and by encouraging past Presidents to seek binding international agreements banning such nets worldwide (achieved under the George H.W. Bush Administration). The large scale driftnets caused the mortality of large quantities of marine life in addition to the species that fishermen were targeting.
- However, neither domestic nor international law, as currently written, captures the drift gillnets used along the West Coast to catch swordfish, despite their significant impact on non-target and protected marine life.
- The California-based swordfish drift gillnet fishery, which predominately fishes federal waters offshore California, is the last place in the U.S. where these deadly large mesh drift gillnets are allowed. Due to concerns about bycatch, swordfish driftnets are prohibited or not utilized off the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts, Washington State, Alaska, Oregon, and Hawaii. In July, Mexico banned driftnets as well.
- While these drift gillnets are used to target swordfish and thresher shark, over 60 other species are caught as bycatch in these nets, including endangered marine turtles. More dolphins and porpoises are killed in this fishery than all other U.S. West Coast and Alaska fisheries combined.

What the bill does:

- Updates the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), the law governing the management of marine fisheries in federal waters, to reflect that, like large-scale driftnetting already banned under U.S. law, the use of large mesh drift gillnets along the West Coast significantly impacts marine life.
- Consistent with long-established U.S. policy on large-scale driftnetting, the bill would require the phase out of large mesh drift gillnets currently used to target swordfish and thresher sharks along the West Coast by 2020. The bill would not affect any other fishery in the U.S. Alternative fishing gear is already successfully utilized in the Atlantic and is being tested in the Pacific region.
- Authorizes a modest program to assist fishermen in transitioning away from the use of large mesh drift gillnets to profitable and more sustainable gear types.