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For immediate release

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Maine lobstermen will soon be required to replace all the float rope between their traps. According to the proposed changes to the whale plan released last year, by January 2008 lobstermen will be required to replace miles and miles of floating rope in order to protect endangered whales from entanglement. The Final Rule (whale plan) is expected to be released by early fall 2007.

When they exchange the lines for rope that will sink, harvesters are likely to incur huge expenses, but a little-known Maine research organization is poised to help alleviate their financial burden.

The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF), a small non-profit organization that involves lobstermen in collaborative research with scientists, has been awarded nearly \$2 million in federal money to assist lobstermen in converting to sinking line. The project will begin this summer with a rope exchange planned for the spring 2007.

"This grant is bigger than any funding we have had before," said Erin Pelletier, assistant director for GOMLF. If all goes as planned, the federal government will appropriate additional funding for future phases of the project to ensure that lobstermen in all regions have access to the assistance.

The foundation also manages several other projects aimed at collecting long-term data to help lobster managers make better decisions about the resource.

"GOMLF involves fishermen in research because they have a unique understanding of the resource," said Pelletier. Many other research projects that involve harvesters merely hire them to drive their boats. "We have a lot of fishermen participating in a hands-on manner, using their special knowledge."

GOMLF took over management of the Maine Lobstermen's Association's (MLA) 20-year-old V-notch Survey, in which lobstermen notch egg-bearing female lobsters and return them to the sea. In addition to the V-notch Survey, projects currently administered by GOMLF include the Ventless Trap Survey, community sea sampling, eMOLT, electronic logbooks and whale-friendly gear research. Volunteers are testing experimental versions of sinking trap lines to prepare for the new NMFS gear regulations, should alternatives be allowed in the Final Rule.

"We're trying to determine how far off the bottom the rope is actually fishing because ropes that float will soon be illegal. A bunch of guys put probes on experimental ropes last fall, pressure sensors that determine depth," explained Pelletier. "We'll be working with Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) again this season to learn what works and what doesn't." They hope to find an alternative to the

'sinking' rope NMFS requires in other locations, because Maine's hard, rocky sea bottom conditions are rough on sinking lines and they can pose a safety hazard to fishermen.

"Our projects help management by giving pieces of the puzzle that no one had before," Pelletier said. For more information, visit www.gomlf.org. For information on the Poly Groundline Exchange Program, contact Laura Ludwig, 207-263-5300.