

SEA TURTLE RESCUE ASSISTANCE ACT OF 2022



S.4432 and H.R.7918: SUPPORT SEA TURTLE RESCUE AND REHABILITATION EFFORTS

The United States government classifies all known sea turtle species present in U.S. waters as threatened or endangered under the [Endangered Species Act](#). Fisheries bycatch and marine entanglements, ocean industrialization, and climate change continue to put sea turtle populations at risk, leading to an increase in recorded strandings. Current efforts to keep pace with the increasing numbers of sea turtles that require rescue and rehabilitation are severely underfunded. In order for the federal, state, and organizational members of the [Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network \(STSSN\)](#) to best intervene and respond to these growing threats, a dedicated federal sea turtle rescue and assistance program is imperative.

To advance the recovery of sea turtle species and respond to increasing rescue demands, Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and Representative Bill Keating (D-MA-9) introduced [S.4432](#) and [H.R.7918](#), or the **Sea Turtle Rescue and Assistance Act**. This bill 1) creates a grant program at the Department of Commerce to fund sea turtle rescue, recovery, and research and authorizes \$5 million in sorely needed funding annually from 2023-2028; 2) directs the Secretary of Commerce, with the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, to develop criteria for awarding grants and provide opportunities for engagement with a range of stakeholder groups on the issue; and 3) prioritizes non-profit applicants with an established record of rescue, scientific research, rehabilitation, and forensic science with respect to stranded sea turtles.

THREATS TO SEA TURTLES

[Stranding](#) | 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 injury, illness, or other problems.

[Fisheries Bycatch](#) | Accidental capture in fisheries, known as bycatch, can prevent air-breathing animals from swimming to the water's surface, causing them to drown.

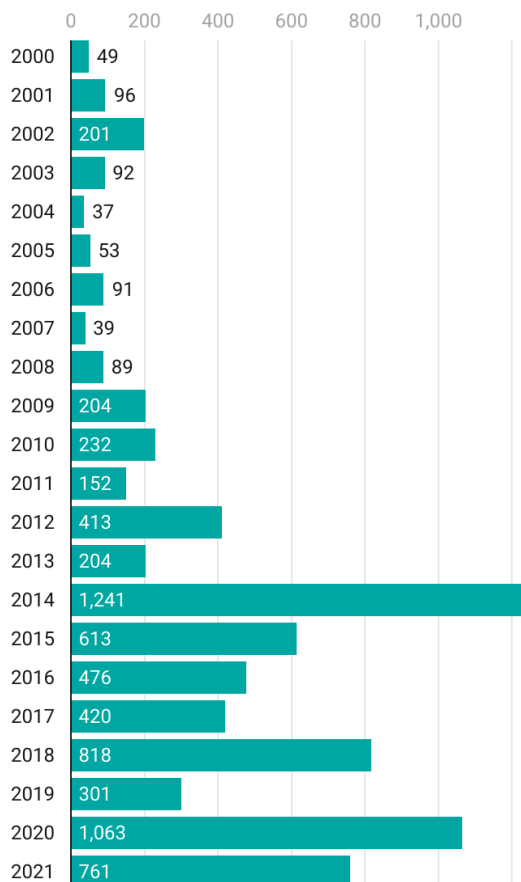
[Cold-stunning](#) | Sea turtles migrate seasonally to find rich food. When water temperatures drop or unexpected weather events occur, turtles find themselves stranded and experience a phenomenon called cold-stunning, which is similar to hypothermia in humans. If not treated in time, cold-stunning can be fatal.

[Habitat Alteration](#) | Coastal development projects, erosion, sand mining, and excessive beach lighting, result in a loss of nesting habitat for sea turtle populations.

[Vessel Strikes](#) | Collisions between sea turtles and large boats, recreational vessels, or ferries can result in severe injury or death for sea turtles as they surface to breathe, bask at the surface, or forage in shallow areas.

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Annual Cold-Stun Sea Turtle Strandings in Massachusetts



Source: Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, unpublished data

Currently, federal programs exist to support the conservation and recovery of marine mammal species like baleen whales, harbor porpoises, and northern fur seals. Through the [Prescott Grant Program](#), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has awarded more than \$67.6 million over the last 20 years in competitive grant funding to eligible [marine mammal stranding network](#) participants to respond to and care for federally protected marine mammals. Many of the same institutions that participate in federally supported marine mammal stranding networks voluntarily help fill federal sea turtle recovery mandates with little to no federal funding for this work. A recent informal survey of eight sea turtle stranding and response institutions **found collective spending of \$5 million per year and a median annual cost of more than \$400,000 per institution for sea turtle stranding response and rehabilitation**. In the past decade alone, the New England Aquarium has [treated thousands](#) of Kemp's ridley, green, and loggerhead sea turtles that stranded due to cold-stunning, debris ingestion, entanglement in fishing gear, and more. Given [steadily increasing](#) numbers of reported strandings, this level of voluntary contribution to federal efforts to protect sea turtles covered by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is no longer sustainable.

Organizations and members of the STSSN, including the New England Aquarium, are committed to the research, rescue, rehabilitation, and protection of endangered sea

turtles. In order to continue providing the expert care needed to save increasingly threatened sea turtle species, stable federal funding is needed. **By passing the *Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act*, Congress can support endangered sea turtle species and the institutions leading critical rescue, rehabilitation, and protection work for years to come.**