

International ban now in effect for disposal of nets

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

An international ban on disposal of plastic waste at sea that went into effect this week could be a big help to Alaska commercial fishermen, who are losing 1.3 million fish to discarded plastic nets each year.

The problem for the marine ecosystem is that plastic nets, and other solid wastes, can remain in the oceans for unlimited amounts of time, killing marine and other mammals in what is called "ghost fishing."

Environmental organizations have estimated that plastic nets, cut loose or lost at sea, kill up to 750,000 seabirds, more than 5,000 Dall's porpoise and as many as 50,000 seals each year.

The ban on plastic waste disposal, which affects every sea-going vessel, was signed by 30 countries. The

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agreement bans the disposal of plastic bags and six-pack binders, as well as plastic nets used by commercial fishermen.

The burden on enforcing the waste disposal ban will fall upon the U.S. Coast Guard.

Research efforts into the damage to the marine ecosystem caused by plastic waste disposal have been limited.

But it is estimated that each year, 9 million tons of solid waste, produced in the United States alone, are dumped at sea.

Six million more tons are accidentally or deliberately discharged into the ocean by merchant ships.

Fishermen worldwide lose in the neighborhood of 100,000 tons of fishing gear.

Commercial fishermen support the international ban not only because the roving nets kill fish which could have been harvested, but because the nets also create problems for vessels by tangling in propellers.