

Summary of Issues and Options for Revised Management of Highly Migratory Species in the U.S. Caribbean (Draft Amendment 4)

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) intends to amend the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to address several issues in the U.S. Caribbean. This amendment will examine management alternatives to improve permitting and data collection, enhance enforcement of regulations, and maintain United States' compliance with multilateral treaties relating to HMS.

A scoping phase is a first step in informing the public of management issues and soliciting public comment on possible future regulatory actions. The issues and options document, which is summarized here, describes relevant issues related to HMS, current management and legal requirements, and some possible options being considered to address the identified issues. For more details, please see the issues and options document.

Public input is critical during the FMP Amendment process and needed to ensure that a full range of alternatives to current management measures and regulations is explored. NOAA Fisheries will hold a series of public scoping meetings in August and September 2008, to discuss Amendment 4 issues and options. Go to <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/> and click on "Breaking News" for information on public scoping meeting times, dates, and locations. NOAA Fisheries plans to have a Draft Environmental Impact Statement and proposed rule published in summer 2009 and a final rule published in spring 2010.

Following is a brief summary of issues that will be considered during the FMP Amendment process and discussed at the scoping meetings. NOAA Fisheries anticipates that additional issues and options to those listed here will be identified during public scoping meetings.

Vessel Permitting - A limited access permit (LAP) program for the commercial Atlantic swordfish and shark fisheries is currently in place which has resulted in increased value of necessary permits. There are few LAPs in the Caribbean region and limited availability and high LAP values may be a barrier to entry into some segments of the HMS fisheries. As local fishermen gain interest in offshore fisheries, there is an increased need for NOAA Fisheries to consider modifying the permitting regime to encourage increased compliance by Caribbean vessels and better collect catch and effort data.

Options: 1) Status quo. 2) Create a Caribbean permit that allows commercial harvest of swordfish, shark, and/or tuna which might or might not be limited to certain gear types or vessel size. 3) Other option.

Dealer Permitting – Current Federal regulations require that all HMS harvested from the management unit be sold to a Federally permitted dealer. As of May 2008, there was only one dealer authorized to purchase swordfish and no dealers authorized to purchase shark in Puerto Rico. In the USVI, there were no dealers authorized to purchase swordfish or shark. The limited number of Federal dealers in the Caribbean likely limits the ability of commercial fishermen to sell their catches or does not match the current practices in the region.

Options: 1) Status quo. 2) Create a single Caribbean HMS dealer permit for swordfish, shark, and tunas. 3) Allow Caribbean handgear permit holders to wholesale/retail HMS catches. 4) Other options.

Commercial Reporting - Dealers and fishermen provide fishery dependent information essential to the management of HMS fisheries. The absence of HMS LAPs and the scarcity of HMS dealers in the U.S. Caribbean have hindered the collection of data. NOAA Fisheries is investigating ways to collect reliable fishery data from Caribbean fishermen and dealers that will work with Caribbean fishing practices. Additionally, NOAA fisheries is considering ways to monitor the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs).

Options: 1) Status quo. 2) Collect catch and effort data from territorial governments. 3) Require vessel logbooks from Caribbean handgear permit holders. 3) Require vessel logbooks and bi-weekly dealer reports from Caribbean handgear permit holders if allowed to wholesale/retail HMS catch. 4) Monitor fishing effort and catches near FADs. 5) Other options.

Recreational Reporting – Currently, few self-reported recreational landings reports for Atlantic blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish, or swordfish are received from anglers in Puerto Rico or the USVI. Federal regulations require owners of Angling and Charter/Headboat category vessels to report landings of recreationally harvested billfish, swordfish, or bluefin tuna to NOAA Fisheries within 24 hours of landing at the dock.

Options: 1) Status quo. 2) Increase outreach and education. 3) Establish mandatory HMS reporting stations. 4) Increase dockside surveys. 5) Other options.

Authorized Gear – Currently, some fishing gears used to fish for HMS, or possessed by Caribbean fishermen with HMS onboard, may not be allowable under Federal regulations. For example, recreational and commercial fishing for bigeye, albacore, yellowfin, skipjack (BAYS) tunas with handlines that are not attached to a vessel is not authorized and Caribbean fishermen setting and retrieving reef fish traps may not possess HMS onboard if that gear is also onboard. Additionally, NOAA Fisheries is concerned about potential negative impacts on HMS stocks by aggregating and fishing for HMS through the use of FADs.

Options: 1) Status quo. 2) Authorize free-floating handlines (buoy gear) in Caribbean BAYS tuna fishery. 3) Allow possession of HMS with non-authorized gears onboard. 4) Prohibit the possession of HMS in the vicinity of FADs. 5) Other options.

Submitting Comments: Comments about Draft Amendment 4 including these and other issues or options may be made at the scoping meetings or may be submitted to Greg Fairclough, HMS Management Division, National Marine Fisheries Service, 263 13th Avenue South, Saint Petersburg, FL 33701 by October 31, 2008. Please mark the outside of the envelope “Comments on Amendment 4 to the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP.” Comments can also be submitted via email at noi.hms.caribbean@noaa.gov, or via fax at (727) 824-5398. Include in the subject line of the email or fax comment the following identifier: NOI HMS Caribbean.