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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Apr. 17, 2008

NOAA's Fisheries Service Outlines Measures to Prevent Overfishing of Sandbar and Other Sharks

NOAA's Fisheries Service has outlined new measures to prevent overfishing and rebuild the number of sandbar and other shark species. The public may comment on the final environmental impact statement (FEIS) until May 19.

The measures in the FEIS include revised quotas and a ban on cutting fins off before landing a shark. A final rule is expected to be published in June and implemented 30 days later.

The number of sandbar sharks are between 20 and 38 percent of the population in the early 20th century before fishing began on sharks. Recent stock assessments indicate that sandbar, porbeagle, and dusky sharks are severely overfished and therefore drastic measures need to be taken to begin rebuilding. It has been illegal to catch dusky sharks since 2000, but these sharks are taken incidentally when fishermen seek other species.

Sandbar sharks are one of the most valuable shark species caught commercially in the Atlantic Ocean. They make up the majority of the current commercial shark landings and are prized for their fins, which are the main ingredient in dishes such as shark fin soup.

"Sandbar sharks, like other sharks, mature late, grow slowly and produce few young, making them particularly vulnerable to fishing pressure," said Jim Balsiger, acting assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "This outlines strong measures to stop overfishing on sandbar and other coastal sharks to allow these species to rebuild."

The final environmental impact statement issued this week isolates the management of the sandbar shark from other species managed in the large coastal shark complex. The FEIS will cut the sandbar shark quota from 1,017 metric tons to 87.9 metric tons, an 85 percent reduction, per year from 2008 to 2012 and cuts the quota for porbeagle sharks.

NOAA is also modifying the list of shark species that recreational fishermen can retain. These measures will have an impact on current shark fisheries, but are necessary to rebuild the various stocks.

In addition, all fishing for sandbar sharks will take place as part of a research fishery with approximately 10 commercial fishing vessels participating per year. The sandbar research will be designed to gain more information on shark life history, techniques to reduce bycatch, and to ensure sufficient data for future stock assessments. The final environmental impact statement would still allow fishing for other large coastal sharks with reduced limits on numbers of sharks taken per trip consistent with recent stock assessments.

Another important measure in the final environmental impact statement would require that all sharks be landed at the dock with their fins still naturally attached. This regulation is designed to improve enforcement against shark finning, where fishermen remove the highly valuable fins from sharks at sea and discard the rest of the shark overboard. The regulation would also assist with identification of the species and improve species-specific data collection for future stock assessments.

The commercial quota for porbeagle sharks, another depleted species, will be reduced from 92 metric tons a year to 1.7 metric tons per year. Recreational anglers would also be allowed to land porbeagle sharks, and porbeagle sharks could be landed in tournaments.

The final environmental impact statement contains other regulations designed to prevent overfishing of several shark species and can be found at the Highly Migratory Species Management Division's Web site, <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>. A final rule is expected to be published in June.

Any comments on the FEIS may be submitted to:

Michael Clark
Highly Migratory Species Management Division
NOAA's Fisheries Service - F/SF1
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring MD 20910.

Comments can also be e-mailed to shark.finalEIS@noaa.gov (please include in subject line the following identifier: Amendment 2 FEIS), or faxed to 301-713-1917.

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