



NMFS Northeast Region

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THORNY SKATES GET INTERNATIONAL FISHERY PROTECTION

U.S. denied yellowtail flounder on the Grand Banks

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The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) has set a 13,500-metric ton total allowable catch limit for thorny skates in the North Atlantic waters under its jurisdiction. With the action, taken this month, the treaty organization became the first international fishery management body to implement measures for a species in the class shared by sharks, skates, and rays — the elasmobranchs. Greater protection for thorny skates has been a United States NAFO goal for more than three years.

However, NAFO once again refused to provide U.S. fishermen an allocation of yellowtail flounder on the tail of the Grand Banks, despite this year's 500 metric ton increase in total allowable catch.

"NAFO took an important step in moving forward with management of thorny skates," said John H. Dunnigan, U.S. government commissioner to NAFO and head of the U.S. delegation. "But on the whole, the United States is extremely disappointed by the failure of parties to recognize the role that the United States has in NAFO, and provide us with reasonable allocation to fish in the NAFO regulatory area," he added.

Dunnigan is also the director of NOAA Fisheries' Office of Sustainable Fisheries. NOAA Fisheries is the federal agency charged with managing living marine resources in federal waters. Dunnigan expressed the extreme disappointment of the United States to NAFO members, and indicated that the United States would be reviewing its commitment to its current investment in the organization in the future.

This important first step for international skate management is consistent with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's International Plan of Action for Sharks, adopted in 1999, which urges a precautionary approach and cooperation through regional bodies in the management of shared elasmobranch stocks. NOAA Fisheries has highlighted thorny skate as a "Species of Concern" under the Endangered Species Act and prohibits possession of this skate under the Northeast Skate Fishery Management Plan. The U.S. delegation was disappointed that advice of NAFO's Scientific Council for a more conservative cap on thorny skates was not followed.

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NAFO also implemented catch limits for white hake and redfish. The three caps are expected to prevent or minimize the potential for captains to use these fisheries as a cover for directed fisheries for moratoria species (such as cod), the bycatch of which is limited to 5 percent of total catch.

With regard to yellowtail flounder on the tail of the Grand Banks, the United States had requested an allocation of yellowtail flounder in 2003 and again in 2004, based on several factors. These include the good health of the stock, a traditional U.S. history of fishing in the NAFO Regulatory Area, and the significant scientific, leadership, and fiscal commitment and contributions of the United States to NAFO.

NAFO was formed in 1979 to govern fishing in international waters of the North Atlantic that lie outside bordering nations' exclusive economic zones. Membership includes 16 nations and the European Union. The United States has been a member since 1995.

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