

**THE FAO SEABIRD INITIATIVE---INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS TO REDUCE SEABIRD BYCATCH IN THE LONGLINE FISHERIES: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN AT HOME? AN ALASKAN PERSPECTIVE.**

(Commentary that appears in *Marine Technology Society Journal* 33: 85-87, Summer 1999)

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**INTRODUCTION**

Recent international initiatives have highlighted the need to address fisheries bycatch issues, including seabird bycatch. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, adopted in 1995, contains an article (7.6.9) that calls for States to "take appropriate measures to minimize waste, discards, catch by lost or abandoned gear, catch of non-target species, both fish and non-fish species,...and promote, to the extent practicable, the development and use of selective, environmentally safe and cost effective gear and techniques." The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) recently developed an implementation plan that responds to the Code's provisions in areas of NMFS jurisdiction or major involvement (NMFS, 1997). This Code provision was addressed in the international arena when an FAO consultation was recently held in Rome in October 1998 to consider a global plan of action that would implement mitigation guidelines to reduce the incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries. Some FAO member nations, including the United States, are already planning for its implementation and considering what their national plan of action will look like.

**BACKGROUND**

Seabird bycatch is an important global conservation issue, the magnitude of which was quantified and addressed as early as 1991 when conservative estimates indicated as many as 44,000 albatrosses (average catch rate of 0.41 birds per 1000 hooks) were killed annually on Japanese longlines in southern oceans (Brothers, 1991). Responding to the need to reduce the bycatch of seabirds in commercial

fisheries in the southern oceans, the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) adopted seabird bycatch mitigation measures in 1992. Under the auspices of the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), Australia, Japan, and New Zealand have studied seabird mitigation measures in their southern bluefin tuna longline fisheries, and in 1995, CCSBT adopted a policy on data and information collection, mitigation measures and education and information dissemination. Since that time, the FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI) and its member states have expressed a strong desire to be more responsive in helping to resolve the seabird bycatch problem. At the 22nd Session of COFI in March 1997, the FAO, Japan, and the United States agreed to organize an FAO Consultation on seabird bycatch in global longline fisheries in October 1998. The objective of the FAO Consultation was to produce a Plan of Action for implementing mitigation guidelines to reduce incidental catches of seabirds in longline fisheries. In preparation for the FAO Consultation, a group of experts, known as the Seabird Technical Working Group (STWG) was established by FAO. The STWG met in March 1998, and drafted guidelines to reduce the incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries and a plan of action to implement the guidelines. The three background papers prepared for the STWG meeting have been consolidated into one document which will be published in the FAO Fisheries Circular Series in 1999. A preliminary version was made available for the FAO Consultation in October 1998 (FAO, 1998a).

In October 1998, 81 FAO member countries met in Rome and agreed on an International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (IPOA). The IPOA describes concrete and specific steps for reducing the incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries at the national, regional, and global levels, calling for national plans of action by 2001. Countries are to conduct assessments of seabird bycatch and, if necessary, develop National Plans of Action (NPOAs). Suggested elements of an NPOA include: Prescription of mitigation measures; plans for research and

development of improved measures or practices and evaluation of the effectiveness of such measures and practices; plans for outreach programs to raise awareness and educate about the IPOA, the NPOA, and the need to reduce seabird bycatch; and data collection programs, including observer programs, to determine the incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries and the effectiveness of mitigation measures. Attached to the IPOA are technical notes to provide assistance to countries in developing their NPOAs and in identifying appropriate technical and operational mitigation measures to reduce seabird bycatch (FAO, 1998b).

In addition to seabird bycatch reduction, the FAO meeting was called to pursue initiatives on sharks and the management of fishing capacity. These three initiatives arise from the 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and are efforts to implement several of its key provisions. These recent events are significant for several reasons: 1) The Code is the only international agreement that addresses practically all aspects of fisheries, including marine and freshwater, capture fisheries and aquaculture, and harvesting and shore-side operations; 2) The Rome meeting represents the first concrete and specific steps to implement on a global basis important provisions of the Code; and specifically on the seabird bycatch initiative, 3) the IPOA represents the only provisional international instrument of such magnitude to address the global seabird bycatch problem on such a broad scale, and 4) the FAO background paper on this issue represents the first detailed comprehensive treatment of its kind to address where the bycatch occurs, what levels of bycatch occur (if known), and what the currently available mitigation measures are to reduce this bycatch.

Although the IPOA is voluntary in nature, the process of its development is designed to lead to its endorsement by consensus at the FAO COFI meeting in February 1999 and adoption by the ultimate governing body of FAO, the FAO Conference, in November 1999. The United States strongly supports the adoption of the IPOA.

## **ALASKA PERSPECTIVE**

Off Alaska, millions of birds, representing over 80 species, occur over waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone. The presence of "free" food in the form of offal and bait attracts many birds to fishing operations. In the process of feeding, birds sometimes come into contact with fishing gear and are accidentally killed. For example, most birds taken during longline operations are attracted to the baited hooks when the gear is being set. These birds become hooked at the surface, and are then dragged underwater where they drown. The probability of a bird being caught is a function of many interrelated factors including: Type of fishing operation and gear used; length of time fishing gear is at or near the surface of the water; behavior of the bird (feeding and foraging techniques); water and weather conditions (e.g., sea state); size of the bird; availability of food (including bait and offal); and physical condition of the bird (molt, migration, health). Almost any species which occurs in these waters is susceptible to interactions with fishing gear.

NMFS began monitoring seabird/fishery interactions off Alaska in 1990 and in 1997 required that operators of hook-and-line vessels in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI) and Gulf of Alaska (GOA) groundfish fisheries use seabird avoidance measures such as: bird scaring lines (streamer lines or buoy bags), sinking baited hooks as quickly as possible (i.e. weighted groundlines), and options for night-setting and underwater deployment of gear through a "lining tube". NMFS implemented regulations for seabird avoidance measures in the Pacific halibut fishery in 1998. NMFS coordinates with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) in determining total seabird bycatch. Bycatch estimates are based on: Observer reports of the number of seabirds taken in observed sets, total fish catch, vessel effort information (i.e. number of hooks) for the observed and unobserved sets, and other information as known and deemed appropriate (e.g. time and area fishing effort, seabird distribution). Preliminary estimates of the annual seabird bycatch for the Alaska groundfish fisheries, based on 1993 to 1997 data, indicate that

approximately 14,000 seabirds are taken annually in the combined BSAI and GOA groundfish fisheries (11,600 in the BSAI; 2,400 in the GOA) at the approximate rates of 0.090 and 0.0568 birds per 1000 hooks in the BSAI and in the GOA, respectively (USFWS, 1998). Of the estimated 14,000 seabirds that are incidentally caught, the species composition consisted of: 67% fulmars, 16% gull species, 9% albatross species, and 8% shearwater species.

Within the NMFS Alaska Region, efforts to reduce seabird bycatch in the longline fisheries are coordinated among the different groups responsible for drafting regulations, managing the groundfish fisheries and the Pacific halibut Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) fishery, enforcing the regulations, seabird bycatch data collection as managed by the Groundfish Observer Program, and public outreach and education, just to name a few. Outside of the Region, NMFS interacts and coordinates with the commercial fishing industry by providing information and outreach materials, seeking public input into efficacy of seabird avoidance measures; USFWS, the agency with the trust responsibility for the conservation and management of seabirds, including the implementation of the Endangered Species Act and the protections afforded to the endangered short-tailed albatross; other NMFS regions in their efforts to address seabird bycatch issues; national and international research institutes and programs with involvement in efficacy tests of the avoidance measures and other seabird/fishery interaction issues; and environmental and industry non-governmental organizations (NGOs) interested in this issue. All of these efforts, both within NMFS and the interfaces NMFS has with other groups are consistent with and complementary to the expectations that will accompany the development and implementation of an NPOA in the United States. Similar efforts can be expected in other NMFS regions where assessments of longline fisheries identify a seabird bycatch problem.

## **NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

In addition to efforts at the Regional level, NMFS has engaged in efforts at the national and

international levels to highlight the seabird bycatch issue and encourage the adoption of the IPOA. Nationally, NMFS has added staff to address development of the NPOA. Internationally, at 3 recent bilateral fisheries meetings with Chile, Mexico, and Russia, respectively, this issue was added to the meeting agenda for the first time and dialogues initiated with the respective government seabird experts.

NMFS's recently published strategic document, *Managing the Nation's Bycatch: Programs, Activities, and Recommendations for the National Marine Fisheries Service* (NMFS, 1998), includes national objectives, goals, and recommendations, all intended to address current programs and future efforts to reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality of marine resources, including protected species and seabirds. NMFS believes that its implementation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the NMFS Bycatch Plan, and the IPOA should result in the significant reduction of seabird bycatch in the Alaska longline fisheries and any other US longline fisheries where seabird bycatch is a problem. These efforts will require the joint and cooperative efforts of NMFS, the Regional Fishery Management Councils, the USFWS, the affected commercial longline fishing industry, environmental NGOs, and other interested groups.

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