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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA Issues Rule to Prevent Overfishing of Atlantic Sharks

NOAA's Fisheries Service today announced a new rule to lower significantly the fishing quotas for sandbar and porbeagle sharks in order to rebuild these depleted species. NOAA will also implement new regional quotas for the other large coastal sharks.

The new shark regulations will take effect starting on July 24.

That latest stock assessment determined that the population of sandbar sharks was depleted and the rate of fishing was too high. Sandbar sharks are prized for their fins, and they are one of the most commercially valuable shark species caught in the Atlantic Ocean. They make up the majority of current East and Gulf Coast commercial shark landings.

"Our recent stock assessments show we need to take strong conservation measures to stop overfishing on sandbar and other sharks to allow these species to rebuild," said Jim Balsiger, NOAA acting assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "These sharks, like many sharks, mature late, grow slowly and produce few young, making them particularly vulnerable to fishing pressure."

The rule also requires all sharks to be offloaded at the dock with all of their fins 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 shark carcasses overboard. The regulation will also assist with identification of shark species and improve species-specific data collection for future stock assessments.

In the new rule that will publish in the Federal Register on Tuesday, June 24, 2008, NOAA's Fisheries Service establishes a separate sandbar shark annual commercial quota of 87.9 metric tons. Sandbar sharks were previously part of the Large Coastal Shark Complex that had an annual commercial quota of 1,017 metric tons. Sandbar sharks comprised an average of 60 percent of the large coastal shark landings, an annual average of 594.4 metric tons.

The rule establishes regional quotas for the other large coastal sharks. These quotas (non-sandbar shark Large Coastal Shark regional quotas) are 390.5 metric tons in the Gulf of Mexico region and 187.8 metric tons in the Atlantic region. The rule also reduces the annual commercial quota for porbeagle sharks from 92 metric tons to 1.7 metric tons per year.

Under this final rule, all fishing for sandbar sharks will take place as part of a shark research fishery with approximately 10 commercial fishing vessels participating per year. More details on the research fishery can be found in a separate Federal Register notice that will also publish on Tuesday. NOAA's Fisheries Service is now accepting applications from commercial shark fishermen for the shark research fishery. Applications are available on the Highly Migratory Species Management Division's Web site, <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>. The objective of the research fishery is to gain more information on shark life history, as well as to develop techniques to reduce bycatch, and ensure sufficient data collection for future stock assessments.

The new rule prohibits recreational shark fishermen from landing sandbar or silky sharks.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.