



Contact: Monica Allen  
202-379-6693  
Connie Barclay  
301-713-2370

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
April 1, 2011

## **New Fishing Hooks Protect Bluefin Tuna in Gulf of Mexico But Allow Catch of Yellowfin Tuna and Swordfish**

NOAA's Fisheries Service will require commercial fishermen who fish for yellowfin tuna, swordfish and other species with longlines in the Gulf of Mexico to use a new type of hook, called a weak hook, designed to reduce the incidental catch of Atlantic bluefin tuna. The hooks will be required starting May 5, 2011.

Directed fishing for bluefin tuna in the Gulf has been prohibited since the early 1980s, however bluefin are caught incidentally by longline fishermen who target other species. The Gulf of Mexico is the only known spawning area for the western stock of Atlantic bluefin tuna, a historically overfished species. Many bluefin die from the stress endured in this incidental capture in warm water even if fishermen release them.

"NOAA worked with longline fishermen from the Gulf to test the weak hook carefully over the last three years," said Eric Schwaab, assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Our cooperative scientific research with fishermen is showing that this new technology can protect bluefin tuna in the Gulf while still allowing fishermen to target yellowfin tuna and swordfish."

The weak hook is a circular hook constructed of thin gauge wire, and is designed to straighten when a large fish, such as bluefin tuna, is hooked, releasing it but holding on to smaller fish. The average size of bluefin tuna landed in the Gulf of Mexico longline fishery is 485 pounds, while the average for yellowfin tuna is about 86 pounds.

Yellowfin tuna and swordfish are valuable commercial fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico, supporting fishing jobs on approximately 50 vessels as well as jobs on shore. The two species bring longline fishermen annual dockside earnings of \$7 million. Research showed that the weak hook could result in some reductions in target catch while some longline fishermen have reported weak hooks did not hurt their businesses.

"During our tests, we used regular hooks for half our hooks and half were the new weak hooks," said Capt. Mike Carden, a longline fisherman from Panama City, Fla. who took part in the cooperative research. "We were so happy with the weak hooks we quit using the heavy hooks. The weak hook releases fish we don't want to catch. Because it's smaller and lighter, we catch more yellowfin tuna on the weak hook. There's several of us who have gone to the weak hook."

By putting the weak hook rule into effect during the spring 2011 bluefin tuna spawning season, NOAA is also following a recommendation by the scientific committee for the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. ICCAT, to which the U.S. is a member, manages Atlantic bluefin tuna. The scientific committee advised ICCAT to protect the western Atlantic bluefin tuna that were spawned in 2003 and will soon be reaching maturity and beginning to spawn themselves. Scientific data indicates that this is the largest year's class of bluefin since 1974, and early estimates are that the number of fish born in subsequent years have been quite low. Protecting these fish during spawning can help the long-term rebuilding of the depleted bluefin tuna population.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.