



NMFS Announces a Proposed Rule to require the use of “Weak Hooks” in the Gulf of Mexico Pelagic Longline Fishery to Reduce the Incidental Catch of Bluefin Tuna

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposes to require the use of a “weak hook” by pelagic longline (PLL) vessels fishing in the GOM (GOM). A weak hook is a circle hook that meets NMFS’ current size and offset restrictions, but is constructed of round stock wire that is thinner-gauge (i.e. no larger than 3.65 mm in diameter) than the circle hooks currently used in the PLL fishery. The purpose of the proposed action is to reduce PLL catch of Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) in the GOM, which is the only known BFT spawning area for the western Atlantic stock of BFT, consistent with the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) Standing Committee for Research and Statistics advice that ICCAT may wish to protect the strong 2003 year class until it reaches maturity and can contribute to spawning. The purpose is also to allow directed fishing for other species to continue within allocated BFT sub-quota limits. Weak hooks can allow incidentally hooked BFT to escape capture because the hooks are more likely to straighten when a large fish is hooked.

This proposed action is based on research conducted by NMFS that showed that the use of weak hooks in the GOM PLL fishery can reduce BFT catch by 56.5 percent. Some PLL vessel operators and owners involved in the study have shown support for weak hook use because some vessels caught more yellowfin tuna with the weak hook. Initial results show the potential for increasing the biomass of the western BFT stock in the short- and long-term with some potential adverse impacts to directed fisheries.

The comment period for this proposed rule is open until February 12, 2011. Public hearings will be held at the following times, dates, and locations. All meetings will begin with an opportunity for individuals to receive information and ask questions about the GOM PLL BFT Mitigation Research followed by a public hearing.

1. February 7, 2011, 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST), NOAA Science Center, 1301 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD, 20910.
2. February 9, 2011, 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Central Standard Time (CST), NMFS Panama City Laboratory, 3500 Delwood Beach Road, Panama City, FL, 32408
3. February 10, 2011, 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. CST, Hilton New Orleans Airport Hotel, 901 Airline Drive, Kenner, LA, 70062

An operator-assisted conference call will be held to receive comments from HMS Advisory Panel members on February 8, 2011, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. EST (phone number 888-989-6419; participant code 3557004). This will be a conference call to hear comments from HMS Advisory Panel members; however, the public is invited to participate, and this is not an



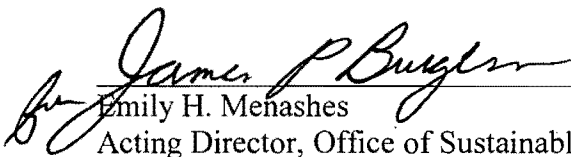
HMS Advisory Panel meeting. Priority will be given to comments from the Advisory Panel and comments from the general public will be heard as time allows.

Written comments, identified by "0648-BA39", may be submitted electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal <http://www.regulations.gov>, or sent by fax or mail to the contact information included below. All comments received are a part of the public record and generally will be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov> without change. All Personal Identifying Information (for example, name, address, etc.) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit Confidential Business Information or otherwise sensitive or protected information. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter N/A in the required fields, if you wish to remain anonymous). You may submit attachments to electronic comments in Microsoft Word, Excel, WordPerfect, or Adobe PDF file formats only.

This notice is a courtesy to the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) fishery participants to help keep you informed about the fishery. Official notice of Federal actions is made through filing such notice with the Office of Federal Register. For further information on this proposed rule and draft EA, contact Randy Blankinship at 727-824-5399 or Dianne Stephan at 978-281-9260. The media contact is Monica Allen (301-713-2370). Copies of the proposed rule and draft EA are available upon request from the Highly Migratory Species Management Division, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910 (phone: 301-713-2347, fax: 301-713-1917). The information will also be posted on the HMS website at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>.

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Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries

01/12/2011
Date