



NMFS Requires the Use of “Weak Hooks” in the Gulf of Mexico Pelagic Longline Fishery to Reduce the Incidental Catch of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announces a final rule requiring the use of “weak hooks” by pelagic longline (PLL) vessels fishing in the Gulf of Mexico (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 no larger than 3.65 mm in diameter. The purpose of the 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 incidental BFT subquota limits and with less likelihood of fishery interruption due to lack of BFT subquota availability. 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 action is based on research conducted by NMFS that showed that the use of weak hooks in the GOM PLL fishery may 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 in the short-term.

Effective May 5, 2011, all vessels in the GOM with PLL gear onboard must possess, use, and deploy only circle hooks described at § 635.21(c) and that are constructed of corrodible round wire stock that is no larger than 3.65 mm in diameter. The following two circle hook models currently meet this requirement:

- **Mustad Model # 39988 D – 16/0**
- **Eagle Claw Model # L2048ELM - 16/0**

Other hook manufacturers may offer models that also meet the requirement, and NMFS does not endorse any particular make or model.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) (an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit that preserves and restores our nation’s native wildlife species and habitats) is conducting a Weak Hook Voucher Program through which Atlantic Tuna Longline permit holders who use PLL gear in the GOM may obtain an initial supply of weak hooks. NFWF will mail vouchers to Atlantic Tuna Longline permit holders that used PLL gear in the GOM in 2009-2010. Atlantic Tuna



Longline permit holders that have not received the NFWF voucher in the mail by April 12, 2011, and are planning to fish with PLL gear in the GOM this year, may request a voucher by contacting Mary Beth Charles with NFWF at 202-595-2445 or Marybeth.charles@nfwf.org. Weak hook vouchers are for hooks that will be used in the Gulf of Mexico and NFWF will consider requests for vouchers on a case-by-case basis.

This notice is a courtesy to the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) fishery participants to help keep you informed about the fishery. More details on the reasons regarding the decisions and responses to the public comments received are provided in the final rule and Final Environmental Assessment for this action. Copies of these documents 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 is also posted on the HMS website at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>. For further information on this final rule and its requirements, contact Randy Blankinship at 727-824-5399 or Dianne Stephan at 978-281-9260. The media contact is Monica Allen (301-713-2370). This email notice is intended to provide a plain-language summary of how to comply with only the new regulations and is produced in compliance with Section 212 of the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act.

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Date