

**FINAL  
SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

**REGULATORY AMENDMENT 1 TO THE  
ATLANTIC TUNAS, SWORDFISH, AND SHARKS  
FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**REDUCTION OF BYCATCH, BYCATCH MORTALITY,  
AND INCIDENTAL CATCH  
IN THE ATLANTIC PELAGIC LONGLINE FISHERY**

*(Includes Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement,  
Regulatory Impact Review, and Final Regulatory Flexibility Analysis)*

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## **Reduction of Bycatch, Bycatch Mortality, and Incidental Catch in the Atlantic Pelagic Longline Fishery**

- Final Action:** Implement time/area closures in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Bight/East Florida Coast and prohibit use of live bait in the Gulf of Mexico by pelagic longline fishermen who hold federal highly migratory species permits. The final rule will be published by August 1, 2000.
- Type of statement:** Final Documents: Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, Social Impact Assessment, Regulatory Impact Review, and Regulatory Flexibility Analysis
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**Abstract:** The intent of these final actions is to reduce the occurrence of bycatch and incidental catch by U.S. commercial fishermen who hold Federal highly migratory species permits and use pelagic longline gear in the Atlantic Ocean. The final action would amend the Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan by establishing time and area closures and gear restrictions to pelagic longline fishing to reduce the bycatch and bycatch mortality of highly migratory species, threatened or endangered turtle species, and the incidental catch of marine mammals and sea birds. This action minimizes the reduction in target catches of tuna, swordfish, and other commercially-viable species. The final action prohibits the use of pelagic longline gear year-round in an area of the northeastern Gulf of Mexico (DeSoto Canyon) and an area along the east coast of Florida (East Florida Coast). A third area located off Georgia, South Carolina and a portion of North Carolina (Charleston Bump) is closed to pelagic longline gear during February through April. In addition, this final action prohibits the use of live bait on pelagic longline gear used in the Gulf of Mexico. These measures address objectives in the Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan and Amendment One of the Atlantic Billfish Fishery Management Plan, consistent with National Standard 9 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Alternatives considered for managing bycatch and incidental catch from pelagic longlines ranged from no action to a total prohibition of the use of pelagic longline gear. In addition to time/area closures, alternatives examined include limiting the gear soak time, requiring circle hooks, and other gear-based actions.

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## **1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**

### **1.1 General**

This final rule implements time/area closures and gear restrictions for pelagic longline gear deployed by U.S.-flagged vessels in the Atlantic Ocean to reduce pelagic longline bycatch, bycatch mortality, and incidental catch, consistent with National Standard 9 (NS9). Pelagic longline gear is the dominant commercial fishing gear used by U.S. fishermen in the Atlantic Ocean to target highly migratory species (HMS). Further, it is a common commercial fishing gear used by vessels from many other nations in the Western Atlantic Ocean. Pelagic longline fishing by U.S. commercial fishermen is conducted offshore of the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, in the Caribbean basin and South Atlantic Ocean, with a significant proportion of fishing effort occurring within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Management of the U.S. pelagic longline fishery in the Atlantic Ocean and surrounding waters has historically relied upon a catch or landing quota and/or a minimum size limits. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) closely monitors the United States pelagic longline fleet through observer and logbook programs; a vessel monitoring program (VMS) is scheduled for implementation in the pelagic longline fishery on September 1, 2000.

Pelagic longline gear can be modified (gear type and configuration, timing of sets, etc.) to target yellowfin tuna, bigeye tuna, sharks, or swordfish. However, this gear also catches other species (or sizes) of fish (e.g., marlin, sailfish, undersized swordfish), mammals (porpoises or whales) that are either hooked or entangled, sea birds, and sea turtles that are not the gear's targets. Many of the species are not kept because they cannot be legally retained due to species prohibitions, minimum size limits, quotas, or other regulations (i.e., *regulatory discards*), and in these cases, animals must be released in a manner intended to maximize survival. However, there can be significant mortality of the bycatch as a result of the interaction with pelagic longline gear. In other instances, species are not kept *by choice*, due to market value, hold capacity, or for a myriad of other reasons.

Bycatch and bycatch mortality of billfish, undersized swordfish, and sea turtles has been a particular concern for many years because of its impact on the stocks of these species. In September 1997, NMFS released the first report entitled "A Report to Congress: Status of Fisheries in the United States." This report designated North Atlantic swordfish, Atlantic blue marlin, Atlantic white marlin, bluefin tuna, and the large coastal shark (LCS) complex as overfished; west Atlantic sailfish and bigeye tuna were added to the overfished stocks list in 1998 and northern albacore tuna was added in 1999. Further, several sea turtle stocks are listed as either endangered or threatened (see Section 5).

### **1.2 What is Bycatch and Incidental Catch?**

Bycatch has become a central concern of fishing industries, environmentalists, resource managers, scientists, and the public, both nationally and globally. A 1994 report of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations estimated that nearly one-quarter (27

million metric tons (mt)) of the total world catch by commercial fishing operations was discarded (Alverson *et al.*, 1994). Bycatch precludes other more productive uses of fishery resources; it is important to minimize the waste associated with bycatch when so many of the world's fisheries are either fully exploited or overexploited. As a source of fishing mortality, excessive bycatch in commercial fisheries can slow rebuilding of overfished stocks (if most of the bycatch dies) and imposes direct and indirect costs on commercial fishing operations by increasing sorting time, and decreasing the amount of gear available to catch target species. Bycatch concerns also apply to populations of marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds and other components of ecosystems for which there are no commercial or recreational uses.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) defines bycatch as:

*fish that are harvested in a fishery, but are not sold or kept for personal use, and includes economic discards and regulatory discards. [Bycatch] does not include fish released alive under a recreational catch and release fishery management program.*

Some relevant examples of fish that are included in the Magnuson-Stevens Act's definition of bycatch are Atlantic billfish caught and discarded by commercial fishing gear (even if tagged and released); undersized swordfish; and bigeye and yellowfin tunas caught and discarded by commercial fishermen; species for which there is little or no market and which are therefore discarded, such as blue sharks; and other highly migratory species that are not landed for various reasons (including fish hooked and lost, or fish released at the boat - whether or not the fish was tagged). Bycatch also includes the release of prohibited shark species and LCS caught by pelagic longline gear during a closure of that fishery. The recreational fishery can also have bycatch, including both regulatory discards (fish caught below minimum size limits or in excess of bag limits, e.g., 27 inch minimum size for yellowfin tuna with a three-fish per person per trip bag limit), and selective discards of fish that could legally be retained. However, bycatch does not include Atlantic HMS harvested in a commercial fishery that are *not* regulatory discards and that are tagged and released alive under a scientific tag-and-release program. Recreationally caught billfish and white sharks are now part of a catch-and-release program under the Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Tunas, Sharks, and Swordfish (HMS FMP) and Amendment One to the Atlantic Billfish Fishery Management Plan (Billfish FMP Amendment) and as such, are not considered bycatch.

Incidental catch is the catch of those animals that are caught incidental to fishing operations that may or may not be discarded, e.g., bluefin tuna caught on a pelagic longline gear. Incidental catch also includes marine mammals and sea birds which are discarded but are not included in the Magnuson-Stevens Act definition of bycatch. NMFS focuses this rulemaking not only on bycatch as defined by the Magnuson-Stevens Act but on all discarded animals.

NMFS initiated efforts to address the issue of bycatch of finfish and turtles and incidental catch of marine mammals in 1997 through the development and publication of the HMS FMP and

Billfish FMP Amendment. These documents provide detailed discussions of bycatch and incidental catch issues associated with the various HMS commercial and recreational fisheries. The HMS FMP and its associated consolidated rule include several measures to reduce bycatch, including a time/area closure for pelagic longline fisheries to reduce discards of bluefin tuna, limited access for swordfish and shark fisheries, proposed quota reductions that serve as part of the foundation for international negotiations, gear restrictions (e.g., the ban on drift gillnets for tuna fishing as a result of frequent encounters with marine mammals and other protected species), and outreach programs (e.g., providing information on the impacts of circle hooks, live vs. dead bait, etc.). Further, the Billfish FMP Amendment defers management of billfish bycatch in commercial HMS fisheries to the plan that manages the directed fisheries in which billfish bycatch occurs; namely the HMS FMP.

The HMS FMP indicated that time and area closures could be a useful tool to reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality in the pelagic longline fishery in the short term. The HMS FMP included a time/area closure for pelagic longline fishermen to address bluefin tuna incidental catch. Although the draft HMS FMP proposed a time/area closure in the Florida Straits aimed at reducing undersized swordfish bycatch, public comment indicated that the closure was likely too small to be effective, and was not comprehensive with respect to the incidental catch of other species. NMFS agreed with the comments and did not finalize the Florida Straits closure, instead opting to develop a more effective closure, together with pelagic longline gear restrictions, to address bycatch issues, which is the purpose of this final rule.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Final Action**

The following objectives were developed to guide agency action, to the extent practicable, to reduce bycatch, bycatch mortality, and incidental catch of undersize swordfish, billfish, and other overfished and protected species from the U.S. pelagic longline fishery operating in the Atlantic Ocean:

- (1) Maximize the reduction in finfish bycatch;
- (2) Minimize the reduction in the target catch of swordfish and other species;
- (3) Consider impacts on the incidental catch of other species to minimize or reduce incidental catch levels; and
- (4) Optimize survival of bycatch and incidental catch species.

This rulemaking is also consistent with the objectives of the HMS FMP and the Billfish FMP Amendment. It particularly addresses the objective of the HMS FMP “to minimize, to the extent practicable, bycatch of living marine resources and the mortality of such bycatch that cannot be avoided in the fisheries for Atlantic tuna, swordfish, and sharks.” Although the Billfish FMP Amendment defers management of commercial fishing bycatch to the HMS FMP, it does state an objective of that plan is to “...minimize to the extent practicable, bycatch and discard mortality of billfish on gears...” Further, to the extent that these actions reduce mortality levels of overfished resources, particularly of pre-reproductive fish and spawning populations, these objectives will augment rebuilding efforts initiated in the HMS FMP and Billfish FMP Amendment.

#### **1.4 Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act**

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) is the primary Federal legislation governing interactions between fisheries and species whose continued existence is threatened or endangered. Through a consultative process, this law requires Federal agencies to evaluate proposed actions in light of the impacts they could have on these ESA-listed species. In the case of marine fisheries, NMFS' Office of Sustainable Fisheries (OSF) consults with the NMFS Office of Protected Resources (OPR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine what impacts major fishery management actions will have on threatened and endangered populations of marine species and what actions can be taken to reduce or eliminate negative impacts. Under the formal consultative process, NMFS issues a Biological Opinion (BO) which outlines expected impacts of the proposed action and specifies the reasonable and prudent alternatives to avoid jeopardy or, if the action does not jeopardize threatened or endangered species, specifies reasonable and prudent measures to minimize impacts of any incidental take of the endangered or threatened species (see Section 5.8).

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 is the principal Federal legislation that guides marine mammal species protection and conservation policy. Under requirements of the MMPA, NMFS produces an annual List of Fisheries that classifies domestic commercial fisheries by gear type relative to their rates of incidental mortality or serious injury of marine mammals. The Atlantic pelagic longline fishery for HMS is considered a Category I fishery, which indicates that this gear is associated with frequent serious injury or mortality to marine mammals. Fishermen participating in Category I fisheries are required to be registered under the MMPA and, if selected, to accommodate an observer aboard their vessels. Vessel owners or operators in Category I fisheries must report to NMFS all incidental mortalities and injuries of marine mammals during the course of commercial fishing operations.

#### **1.5 Advisory Panel Deliberation and Public Comment**

As a result of the re-authorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, an HMS Advisory Panel (AP) and an Atlantic Billfish AP were formed during 1997. These panels consist of members from recreational, commercial, environmental, and scientific communities, as well as from state fisheries agencies, the five Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) Advisory Committee. NMFS held a joint HMS-Atlantic Billfish AP meeting during the development of the FMPs in July 1997 to expressly evaluate bycatch issues and options. The discussion focused on possible time/area closures and gear restrictions and/or gear modifications. The draft HMS FMP and draft Billfish FMP Amendment issued in October 1998 included a time/area closure in the Florida Straits to pelagic longline fishing activity during the months of July, August, and September as part of a management strategy to reduce bycatch of undersized swordfish and Atlantic billfish. NMFS received numerous comments concerning the use of time/area closures for the pelagic longline fishery. A range of comments supported the proposed Florida Straits closure, other nursery areas (for swordfish in particular) such as the Charleston Bump and areas in the Gulf of Mexico, and a year-round ban of pelagic longline gear. Comments also opposed any time/area closure that

would have unpredictable results due to redistributed effort. Specific to the proposed area in the Florida Straits, many comments indicated that the area was too small to have the desired conservation effect because fishermen would redistribute their effort along the fringe of the closed areas.

After considering these comments, NMFS agreed and deferred the implementation of a time/area closure for protection of undersized swordfish and billfish pending further analyses of the impacts of effort redistribution, and increased effectiveness with temporal and/or spatial expansion of the time/area management window. Further rationale for the delay was based on the potential magnitude of the economic and social impacts that would likely result from a more extensive time/area closure. Consistent with the delay in the implementation of additional time/area closures in the pelagic longline fishery, NMFS delayed until September 1, 2000, the requirement for all commercial vessels with pelagic longline gear on board to have a NMFS-approved vessel monitoring system.

In June 1999 and again in February 2000, NMFS met with the HMS and Atlantic Billfish APs on various time/area strategies. The latter meeting was to solicit comments on the proposed rule (published December 15, 1999). NMFS considered comments by the APs in the development of this document and the accompanying final rule. Further, NMFS held 13 public hearings on the proposed rule and received several hundred written and verbal comments through March 1, 2000. On April 26, 2000, NMFS published an additional notice to request comments on the expanded Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (IRFA) summary, on an additional closed area alternative (DeSoto Canyon) in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, and on the applicability of delayed implementation strategies for time/area closures for the pelagic longline fishery. The comment period on the additional notice closed on May 12, 2000, with approximately 200 written comments and 2000 form letters received on the additional notice alone. Summaries of the comments submitted and NMFS' response can be found in Appendix B and will also be included in the preamble to the final rule.

## **1.6 Background Research and Supplemental Analyses**

The original Swordfish FMP, approved on August 22, 1985, included measures to reduce the number of small swordfish (defined as swordfish under 50 pounds dressed weight (dw)) taken along the Atlantic coast. The primary regulatory mechanism in the plan to reduce the catch of these fish was the Variable Season Closure (VSC). In essence this was a time/area closure in which each fishing area (New England/Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic, East Florida Coast, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean) was to be closed a sufficient amount of time to reduce its catch of small fish. Each area's reduction was determined by first calculating the difference between the total number of fish under 50 pounds dw in the most recent year and the number caught in 1980 and dividing by the number caught in the most recent year (for all areas combined). This fraction was multiplied by each area's catch of small fish in the most recent year resulting in the number of small fish by which that area had to reduce its catch. For each area, monthly landings of small fish were determined for the most recent year and divided by the number of days in the month. The number of closure days necessary to achieve the requisite reduction was then determined.



Closures were to be during September, October, November or December. Each Council then was to select the starting date for closure, but the duration of the closure was set by the requisite reduction and the monthly landings pattern for the previous year. Although the VSC provision was approved by the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary), it was not implemented.

In 1997, NMFS examined billfish catch information from pelagic longline gear during 1986-1996. Catches were plotted, by quarter, year, and species, with copies of these plots provided to the HMS and Billfish APs. Results of these qualitative plots of catch frequency indicated that billfish are encountered throughout the range of the pelagic longline fisheries, with areas of high billfish catch generally reflecting areas of high pelagic longline effort (P. Mace, pers. comm.). However, some notable differences in the distribution of the various billfish species were identified relative to the range of fishing effort (NMFS, unpublished), including, for example, a relatively higher occurrence of blue and white marlin discards in the western Gulf of Mexico, relative to the level of pelagic longline fishing effort.

Goodyear (1998) examined pelagic logbook data from U.S. commercial fishermen to determine the distribution of relative monthly catch rates of billfish and target species by one, two and five degree areas to identify potential time/area strata that could reduce billfish bycatch. The areas examined were limited to the operational areas of the U.S. pelagic longline fleet, which includes a large area outside the U.S. EEZ. Although the results of Goodyear's study demonstrate that time/area closures could be effective in reducing billfish bycatch in commercial fishing gear, his study did not account for redistribution of pelagic longline effort to other open time/area cells. Billfish are sparsely distributed over vast ocean areas; therefore shifting commercial efforts could result in similar, or perhaps even higher billfish encounter rates elsewhere. Another point to consider is the spatial distribution of the closed areas considered in Goodyear's study, which ranged from the Grand Banks, along the east U.S. coast, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. Some of the areas identified by Goodyear (1998) are outside the U.S. EEZ where other countries also operate commercial longline fleets. Although ATCA provides authority to close these areas to U.S. pelagic longline vessels, the time/area portion of the final rule focuses on the U.S. EEZ to maximize the effectiveness of the closures, because most effort and catch by U.S.-flagged pelagic longline vessels is within this area.

Cramer and Scott (1998) examined pelagic logbook records for 1987 through 1996 to determine the effect of closures on swordfish and discards from the U.S. pelagic longline fishery. They used two analytical techniques (perfect hindsight analysis and five-year average analysis) to identify spatial patterns in the reduction of bycatch and target catches resulting from quarterly closures of two degree squares (latitude X longitude). The perfect hindsight analysis indicated that 50 percent reduction of reported swordfish discards could be achieved with a loss of approximately 15 percent of target catch. The overwhelming majority of the two degree square closures selected by the five-year average analysis were below 35°N latitude. Cramer and Scott ranked the two degree square areas on a quarterly basis and calculated the expected reduction in discards and target catch. If all effort was removed from those areas, reductions ranged from 15 to 27 percent for swordfish discards, 6 to 14 percent for billfish discards, 7 to 12 percent for swordfish landings, 4 to 6 percent in dolphin landings and 1 to 2 percent in bigeye, albacore,

yellowfin, and skipjack (BAYS) tunas landings. Estimates were also made of the number of landed and discarded fish that would not have been caught if all the effort from the closed areas was distributed among the remaining two degree squares in proportion to the reported effort in those squares. Under this scenario, swordfish discards would decrease by 7 to 23 percent, billfish discards be reduced by 2 to 8 percent, swordfish landings could increase by 0 to 4 percent, and BAYS landing could also increase by 4 to 9 percent.

NMFS published a draft technical memorandum which outlined analyses of various areas for closure to longline fishing (Appendix C of the Draft Supplementary Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS)). Those analyses were purely biological and focused on areas of high bycatch rates. Refer to Section 7.0 and Appendix C of this document for more information on the analytical procedures used in the time/area analysis.

A recent manuscript from the NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center (Scott *et al.*, 2000; Appendix D) provides an analysis of available logbook and observer data sets to evaluate the relationships of U.S. pelagic longline catch rates of billfish in the Gulf of Mexico relative to use of live and dead bait. Blue marlin, white marlin and sailfish discards are combined for this analysis; observer sets with unidentified billfish species, which could include swordfish, are also included in the analysis. Predicted reduction in total billfish bycatch ranges from 2 percent to approximately 30 percent depending upon the source of information (logbook and observer) and assumptions about effort levels following conversion from live to dead bait.

## **1.7 The Fishery Management Plan and the Framework Process**

NMFS published the HMS FMP and Billfish FMP Amendment in April 1999. These documents included rebuilding plans to comply with provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act for fisheries identified as overfished, and also contained fishery conservation and management measures to address bycatch and bycatch mortality concerns associated with HMS fisheries. This Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) and the final rule serve as a regulatory amendment to the HMS FMP. Therefore, the final actions apply to those fishermen holding permits for highly migratory species and who use pelagic longline gear. Those pelagic longline fishermen who may target dolphin and wahoo in the South Atlantic Bight but do not hold permits for HMS are required to discard all HMS. The Secretary of Commerce sought the help of the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Fishery Management Councils (FMC) to develop complementary regulations, as appropriate. The South Atlantic FMC (SAFMC) published a draft FMP (April 2000) for the dolphin and wahoo fishery of the Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. The draft FMP includes a preferred action to prohibit the use of pelagic longline gear for dolphin and wahoo within “any time or area closure in the SAFMC’s area of jurisdiction (Atlantic Coast) which is closed to the use of such gear for highly migratory species.” The Gulf of Mexico FMC in its comments on the proposed rule and Draft Supplementary Environmental Impact Statement supported a total closure of the Gulf of Mexico to pelagic longline gear during March through September.

Under the HMS FMP, the activities involved in continuing fishery management include

monitoring, evaluation, adjustment, and revision. There are two primary methods that can be used to change management measures included in an FMP: FMP amendment and framework regulatory adjustment. The HMS FMP included time/area restrictions, gear use restrictions, and gear modifications as management options under the framework procedures. Framework regulatory adjustment procedures provide for timely changes to the management measures in the regulations in response to new information about the fishery. Framework adjustment lends flexibility and efficiency to the regulatory process by allowing NMFS to make time-critical changes in the regulations without engaging in the longer process of amending the FMP. Framework adjustment is not intended to circumvent the FMP amendment process that must take place when circumstances in the fishery change substantially or when a different management philosophy or objectives are adopted, triggering significant changes in the management system. Rather, framework adjustment is intended to make it possible to manage fisheries and meet the objectives of the FMP more responsively under conditions requiring timely management actions. As with an FMP amendment, framework adjustments must go through extensive public and analytical review. This includes a proposed rule, a public comment period, at least one public hearing, and a final rule. AP meetings will be held for a rulemaking if the agency deems it necessary for purposes of consultation or AP review. The AP and public comment processes for this final action on bycatch reduction under the framework process are summarized above in Section 1.4.

## **1.8 Summary**

The purpose of this document is to consider a full range of fishery management alternatives that minimize, to the extent practicable, bycatch, bycatch mortality, and incidental catches of undersized swordfish, billfish, and other non-target HMS, as well as protected species taken by U.S. commercial pelagic longline fishermen operating in the Atlantic Ocean. NMFS considered alternatives that enhance the survival of bycatch and incidental catches of these species that are captured on pelagic longline gear. In this document, NMFS considers the biological, social and economic impacts of these potential management actions. This document supports rulemaking by providing the required analyses of the impacts of the final regulations. This FSEIS serves as a supplement to the environmental impact statement that accompanied the regulations that implemented the HMS FMP. That document can be requested from NMFS, Highly Migratory Species Division, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, or accessed from the following Internet address: <http://www.nmfs.gov/sfa/hmspg.html>.