



Contact: Susan Buchanan
(301) 713-2370

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NEW RULES FOR ATLANTIC HIGHLY MIGRATORY FISH BECOME FINAL
Billfish Tournaments Limited to Using Circle Hooks

Beginning Jan. 1, 2007, billfish tournament participants in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and U.S. Caribbean who use natural bait or natural bait and artificial lure combinations will be limited to using only circle hooks. This new regulation is part of a larger rule finalized this week by NOAA Fisheries Service for the conservation of Atlantic highly migratory species – billfish, tunas, swordfish and sharks.

Tournament participants who use artificial lures may continue using the traditional J-style fishing hooks since there is a high survival rate for fish that are caught and thrown back using this fishing method. Tournaments that wish to fish for blue marlin using J-hooks and natural bait may apply for an exempted fishing permit to help NOAA collect additional scientific information on the impacts of J-hooks on white marlin using different fishing methods.

Studies have shown that fish caught on circle hooks are more likely to survive being caught and released than those caught on J-hooks, because fish are less likely to swallow them and become “gut-hooked.” The circle hook requirement for tournaments could save an estimated 300 billfish from dying in catch-and-release tournaments per year. Many anglers already use circle hooks voluntarily because of the environmental benefit, and pelagic commercial longliners have been required to use them since 2004.

“We’re working to ensure that commercial and recreational fishermen in America have every opportunity to catch the U.S. share of international quotas for highly migratory species without going over our catch limits,” said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service and chairman of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. “By using circle hooks to conserve billfish, we know we’re doing what’s right for the long-term health of these species’ populations.”

NOAA Fisheries Service considered a range of seasonal and area closures that might further conserve marlin, sea turtles, and bluefin tuna and reduce bycatch in longline fisheries. The agency ultimately finalized a closure of the Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps marine reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. The highly migratory species advisory panel will discuss the topic of fishery closures at a meeting October 3-4 in Alexandria, Va., and the agency will conduct further analyses of closures that may benefit bluefin tuna and protected species. The advisory panel also will discuss the billfish tournament circle hook requirement, exempted fishing permits, and potential management actions for Atlantic sharks after hearing results of the latest assessment. Hogarth and the International Gamefish Association will host a meeting in Florida with Atlantic billfish tournament directors Nov. 8 to discuss the new rules, upcoming international issues, and ways in which the agency can better serve these tournaments.

The rule also requires all shark dealers to attend shark identification workshops, and all highly migratory species longline and shark gillnet vessel owners and operators to attend workshops for safe handling, release and identification of protected species. These workshops will help fishermen reduce bycatch and injury to threatened and endangered sea turtles, which sometimes become entangled or hooked in fishing gear.

Shark identification workshops for dealers will lead to more accurate reporting of shark species being harvested, which will result in better stock assessments and ultimately help fishery managers set appropriate catch limits.

Vessel owners and operators must receive a workshop certificate before their permits are renewed in 2007, and shark dealers must receive a workshop certificate before their permit is renewed in 2008.

The new regulations also require recreational fishermen to abide by federal regulations no matter where they are fishing, unless state regulations are more restrictive. This new requirement will help NOAA Fisheries Service and Coast Guard agents enforce federal fisheries laws.

As part of this new rule, NOAA Fisheries Service consolidated the two fishery management plans for Atlantic highly migratory species into one to reduce redundant reviews and comment periods. This approach to managing all the highly migratory species in one plan will allow fishery managers to better identify biological and socio-economic impacts of regulations and fishing practices that span across all the fisheries. The change also will expedite the management process and allow for participation by all sectors when a management action is under consideration that could have cross-fishery impacts.

Atlantic highly migratory species are managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. The commission will meet November 17-26 in Croatia to receive the latest stock assessments for blue and white marlin, bluefin tuna and swordfish.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

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 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

On the Web:

Complete set of highly migratory species regulations: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms> (go to "regulations")

Schedule of dealer and fishermen workshops: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/workshops>

NOAA Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

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