



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NEW FISHING REGULATIONS PROPOSED FOR ATLANTIC TUNAS, SHARKS, SWORDFISH, AND BILLFISH

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is proposing new fishing regulations for Atlantic highly migratory species of tunas, sharks, swordfish, and billfish. The public has until October 18 to comment on the proposed measures.

Tunas, swordfish and sharks are managed under the 1999 Atlantic Tunas, Swordfish and Sharks Fishery Management Plan and its 2003 amendment. Billfish are managed under the 1988 Atlantic Billfish Fishery Management Plan and its 1999 amendment. The agency is combining the management plans for these species in order to streamline internal processes for how regulations are developed and implemented. When finalized, the new plan will combine management of all Atlantic highly migratory species into one document, providing the ability to take an ecosystem approach to managing these stocks.

“By consolidating Atlantic highly migratory species regulations, we’ll take an ecosystem approach and more readily be able to identify linkages between the fisheries to create better management programs for these important fish. This will allow us to act more quickly when changes occur in these dynamic fisheries,” said Bill Hogarth, director of the NOAA Fisheries Service. “The proposed new regulations will strengthen conservation and keep the United States in compliance with international agreements.”

As a conservation-minded member of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the United States has agreed to limit combined recreational landings of white and blue marlin to 250 fish per year. However, white and blue marlin continue to be overfished so in 2007 NOAA Fisheries Service will begin a formal review on the status of white marlin under the Endangered Species Act.

Billfish are an important recreational species, and most anglers have adopted a catch-and-release ethic. However, recent studies indicate that white marlin caught on J-hooks are less likely to survive release than previously thought. To reduce this post-release mortality and to comply with international obligations, the NOAA Fisheries Service is proposing regulations to: implement ICCAT’s 250 blue marlin landings limit, prohibit white marlin landings for five years starting in 2007, and limit billfish tournaments to the use of circle hooks with natural bait and natural/artificial bait combinations, but allow J-hooks with artificial bait.

The NOAA Fisheries Service is proposing to modify subquotas and time periods in the general category bluefin tuna fishery to provide southern areas with a winter fishery and to establish quotas when ICCAT changes its recommendations, rather than each year based upon the fishing season dates. The proposals would respond to recent changes in the fishery and provide fishing opportunities in all geographic areas, while still reflecting historical fishing allocations.

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Bycatch of protected species and non-targeted highly migratory species continues to be a concern. The NOAA Fisheries Service analyzed the effectiveness of existing time and area closures as well as the potential benefits of possible new closures for pelagic longline gear. After extensive review, the agency has determined that additional time and area closures would provide little benefit. The agency is proposing a closure for the Madison-Swanson/Steamboat Lumps fishing area off the west coast of Florida to be consistent with Gulf Council regulations. The agency also proposes to establish criteria for creating or modifying future time and area closures.

The agency is proposing the following additional regulations:

- Require all longline and gillnet vessel owners and operators to attend workshops on how to safely dehook and release sea turtles;
- Require shark dealers to attend workshops on species identification;
- Pursue a rebuilding plan for northern albacore tuna within ICCAT;
- Collect more information about finetooth shark bycatch in other fisheries;
- Change fishing seasons to a calendar year versus fishing year (i.e., the current fishing year begins on June 1 – under the proposal it will begin January 1);
- Allow speargun fishing gear in the recreational Atlantic tuna fishery;
- Allow greenstick gear to fish commercially for non-bluefin tunas;
- Include a recreational permit condition where recreational permit holders would need to abide by federal regulations in state waters, unless state regulations are more restrictive;
- Other regulations include corrections to the regulations and changes to authorized gear.

The public may attend one of the public hearings (see link below to hearing dates and locations), or submit comments on the proposal through October 18, 2005. Comments will be evaluated and a final decision on the rule will be announced in the spring of 2006. Comments may be sent to: Karyl Brewster-Geisz, NOAA Fisheries HMS Division, 1315 East West Highway, Silver Spring, Md. 20910; emailed to sf1.060303D@noaa.gov; or faxed to 301-427-2592. Request a copy of the proposal by calling 301-713-2347, or download it at the Web address below.

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.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and 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 and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

See the Breaking News section on <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/> for the Highly Migratory Species Consolidated Plan Proposed Rule and Public Hearing Dates and Locations.