



NMFS Northeast Regional Office

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Scientists and Fishermen To Tag 7,000 Yellowtail

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Gloucester, MA – Scientists and fishermen aboard four commercial trawlers have begun catching, tagging, and releasing 7,000 yellowtail flounder in New England waters. The tagging project, now in its third year, is a collaborative effort in which NOAA’s Fisheries Service is working with commercial fishermen, state agencies, and academic institutions to gather data that can be used to improve stock assessments for yellowtail, a species that historically has been one of the mainstays of the New England groundfish fishery.

Although fishing effort for yellowtail has been limited in recent years, the species does not appear to have rebounded as quickly as some other groundfish in some areas. While yellowtail on Georges Bank is recovering, those near Cape Cod and in Southern New England waters appear to be rebuilding more slowly than expected under current fishing levels. “The tagging study will help us understand what is happening with the stocks,” said Azure Westwood, a biologist working on the project for NOAA’s Fisheries Service.

Information from the tags will help scientists study the movement of fish and the mixing of stocks. It will also help scientists make a better estimate of the percentage of fish that are caught by commercial fishermen.

Fishermen and scientists conducting the study are asking commercial fishermen to return any tags they find on yellowtail. These could be plastic pink or yellow disks approximately the size of a

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quarter, or data storage tags that look like small circuit boards. Anyone who finds a tagged flounder can call a toll free number (1-877-826-2612) and report the tag number, location and date. It is also important to report the depth at which the fish was caught and the fish's length. The tag, along with scales from the fish, should be mailed to Westwood at "ATT: YT Tagging, 166 Water Street, Woods Hole, MA, 02543."

People who return a pink or yellow \$100 Reward tag or a data storage tag win a \$100 reward. Pink lottery tags are entered into a series of \$1,000 lotteries that are held every few months throughout the year.

"People have been good about returning tags," said Steve Cadrin, the NOAA Fisheries Service biologist managing the project. "In 2003 and 2004, we put out nearly 30,000 tags, and we've already gotten nearly 1,700 back. The information from the tags will give us a better idea of yellowtail movements and mortality, and will help us determine the ages of fish accurately – the end result will be a better, more accurate stock assessment."

Cadrin said the yellowtail study is an example of research that is truly a collaborative effort between industry and scientists.

"This is the best of both worlds," Cadrin said. "This study is making the best use of the talents of commercial fishermen and the talents of our scientists. This is the way collaborative research should be done."

Cadrin cited several fishermen who have played key roles in the study, including Fred Mattera (out of Point Judith, RI) and Rodney Avila, Jr. (New Bedford). "They have contributed their expert knowledge of fish in the design of the project, and they've helped get support for the project on the docks," Cadrin said.

Fishermen and scientists began the 2005 phase of the tagging project June 9 with day trips in Ipswich Bay and off Provincetown. Other commercial vessels will make week-long trips this month and next month to tag yellowtail on Georges Bank and in Southern New England waters.

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The participating vessels are chosen through a bid process. The 2005 tagging vessels are: F/V *Ellen Diane*, out of Hampton, NH, owned by David Goethel; F/V *Trident*, Rodney Avila, Jr., New Bedford; F/V *Blues Skies*, Luis Ribas, Provincetown; and F/V *Sao Paulo*, Tony Borges, New Bedford.

The yellow and pink tags are numbered pieces of plastic that provide scientists with information about fish movement. Some of the yellow and pink tags are attached to an orange disk underneath the fish – those tags should be returned with scales from the fish.

Data storage tags are smaller than a paper clip. They record pressure and temperature every 14 seconds, information that may shed new light on yellowtail behavior.

“All the tags are important, but data storage tags are particularly important because they tell us about where the fish has been,” explained Goethel, a commercial fisherman involved in the study.

“For example, from early returns, yellowtails appear to spend some portion of the night up in the water column. This has already led to rethinking of stock assessments which assumed yellowtail were always on the ocean floor,” said Goethel, captain and owner of F/V *Ellen Diane*.

The yellowtail project is funded through 2006, and is now in its third year. Tagging studies typically begin paying dividends in three years. Information from the 1,700 returned tags is now being processed and should soon be available to fisheries scientists doing yellowtail stock assessments.

The 2005 tagging experiment includes one new wrinkle - a cage experiment in which 45 fish were tagged and placed in cages in Ipswich Bay. Another 45 untagged fish were caught and kept in the same cages. The caged fish will allow scientists to determine whether the catch-and-release and tagging of yellowtail causes mortality in some of the fish. In addition, live fish will be tagged and held in NOAA’s Woods Hole Science aquarium where scientists can monitor their behavior and observe tag retention.

Partners in the Yellowtail Flounder Cooperative Tagging Project are commercial fishermen; the NOAA Fisheries Service Northeast Fisheries Science Center; School for Marine Science and Technology,

UMASS Dartmouth; Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries; Northeast Consortium, UNH; RI Division of Fish and Wildlife; and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans-Canada.

Sidebar: New Bedford Trawler Voyager I Named Star Tagging Vessel

F/V *Voyager I* has been named the Outstanding Partner in a yellowtail tagging project being conducted by a team of scientists and commercial fishermen.

“These guys have been terrific,” said John Boreman, Science and Research Director at the NOAA Fisheries Service Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC).

“This captain and crew of the *Voyager I* have not only returned 69 tags, they have been meticulous about gathering the data to go with the tags,” Boreman said. “The information they’ve provided will be really helpful for everyone who works on yellowtail stock assessments.”

The scientists conducting the tagging project cited *Voyager I* Captain Fred Marques for returning 37 tags and Tony Fernandez for returning 32 tags – all of which were collected while the New Bedford based trawler was fishing on Georges Bank. The total of 69 is nearly twice the number returned by any other vessel. Both men will be awarded plaques for their efforts.

One of Tony’s 32 tags was a \$100 reward tag. Tony was also the winner of the fifth \$1,000 lottery when NOAA Fisheries Service Director William Hogarth drew one of Tony’s tags in a March drawing at the Maine Fishermen’s Forum.

The scientists managing the yellowtail tagging project also cited Dave Martins and Darin Jones, both from the School for Marine Science and Technology, UMASS Dartmouth, for their outreach, field work, and tag collection.

“Every tag counts,” said Azure Westwood, a fisheries biologist working on the yellowtail tagging project with NOAA Fisheries Service’s NEFSC. “We ask everyone to return every tag they find –

even if they cannot provide exact information about the location or the fish that was carrying the tag. Every tag that is returned provides some information, and may be eligible for the lottery.”

Westwood urged fishermen to return tags even if the fish is sub-legal size or if it looks freshly tagged and released.

“We’ve had a tag returned by a state biologist who found it inland on a trail while he was surveying Noman’s Island,” Westwood said. “We’ve had two tags returned from the bellies of monkfish, and some from yellowtail racks that were being used in bait bags by lobstermen.”

One of the lobstermen won one of the \$1,000 lotteries for his returned tag.

Anyone who has questions about the tags and the tagging project can contact Westwood at azure.westwood@noaa.gov or (508) 495-2238. Information about lottery drawing schedules, tag returns, and the tagging project is available online at www.cooperative-tagging.org.

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