

Preliminary Summary of Public Comments on
Draft Amendment 7 to the 2006 Atlantic Consolidated Highly Migratory Species Fishery
Management Plan on Bluefin Tuna Management
March 21, 2014

This preliminary summary of public comments received on Draft Amendment 7 to the 2006 Atlantic Consolidated Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Fishery Management Plan on bluefin tuna management was prepared for the April 2014 HMS Advisory Panel meeting to provide the Panel a concise summary for informational purposes. This summary may be revised based on additional review and analysis of the public comments and should not be considered the official Agency summary of public comments on Draft Amendment 7 on bluefin tuna management.

A - Quota Allocations

Codified Reallocation

NMFS received comments that give a variety of reasons for not supporting codified reallocation to the Longline category reflecting the historical 68-mt dead discard allowance (preferred Alternative A2a).

- NMFS should not provide additional quota to the pelagic longline fishery because it would undercut the benefits of a catch cap, and would discourage the use of alternative gears and efforts to reduce bluefin interactions.
- NMFS should not transfer quota from commercial fisheries with less bycatch to the pelagic longline fishery; commercial and recreational handgear fisheries are more sustainable.
- NMFS should not reduce the Angling or General category subquotas, and should insulate recreational quota from changes to commercial quotas.
- NMFS should consider the economic impact of non-pelagic longline fisheries, which is greater than that of the pelagic longline fishery.
- NMFS should consider the impact on mid-Atlantic anglers; there is a short window of time to fish for bluefin in the mid-Atlantic before they move south.
- Congressional representatives from Massachusetts and the New England Fishery Management Council commented that they believe reallocation as proposed would disadvantage the New England fishery, traditional Massachusetts fleet, and shore-side infrastructure, and would allow fleets from other regions to use a disproportionate amount of quota.
- NMFS should be aware that reallocation would serve to set fishermen in different categories against each other.
- The New England Fishery Management Council commented that NMFS should assess the port-specific impacts of reallocation.

Several commenters suggested alternatives to codified reallocation.

- NMFS should implement a larger and longer duration Gulf of Mexico Gear Restricted Area (GRA) and no access to the Cape Hatteras GRA, along with quota control measures, which will make reallocation unnecessary.
- NMFS should impose greater restrictions on the pelagic longline fishery to reduce their dead discards rather than reallocate quota.

- Several commenters, including the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, stated that NMFS should reallocate from the Purse Seine to the Longline category (Alternative A2c).
- NMFS should cap the number of bluefin tuna caught by the pelagic longline fishery and increase monitoring and observer coverage to ensure compliance.
- NMFS should increase the Longline category allocation from 8.1% to 10% and use additional quota as a buffer to ensure changes can be implemented with sustainable results.
- NMFS should allow the General, Harpoon, and Angling categories to contribute to the 68 mt at the end of the fishing season or the beginning of the following season.
- NMFS should reduce the 68-mt dead discard allowance because the overall quota has declined.
- NMFS should reduce the Longline category allocation.
- NMFS should work towards gaining more bluefin tuna quota at the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT).

NMFS received a number of comments in support of the codified reallocation to the Longline category.

- Several commenters supported codified reallocation for the reasons NMFS proposed Alternative A2.
- The carbon footprint of General, Angling, and other categories is greater than that of the Longline category.
- NMFS should consider that the General category quota regularly goes unfilled.
- NMFS should consider that the pelagic longline fishery is important in harvesting swordfish and maintaining the U.S. swordfish quota at ICCAT.
- All user groups should sacrifice; no one group should bear the regulatory burden.
- NMFS should consider that U.S. consumer access to swordfish, bigeye tuna, and mahi could be compromised by giving a large percentage of bluefin allocation to the General category, which exports much of its bluefin tuna catch to Japan rather than selling it for U.S. consumption, and has no landings of other HMS for U.S. consumers.
- NMFS should consider the history of the Longline category and the strict regulations the category was under when allocations were set.

Annual Reallocation

NMFS received comments supporting an annual reallocation of bluefin quota from the Purse Seine category (preferred Alternative A3a) with some modifications.

- Commenters support the concept of the Purse Seine category losing any unused quota and of Purse Seine quota being available to all categories.
- NMFS should use more than one year's landings in the formula to calculate the Purse Seine allocation.
- NMFS should implement Alternative A3a with a Purse Seine fishery start date of June 1 and a minimum size of 73 inches.
- NMFS should maintain 75 percent of the Purse Seine quota and reallocate 25 percent to the Reserve category.
- NMFS should base the reallocation on individual vessels, not on the entire category.

- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should first implement a 40-percent reduction in the Purse Seine category under Alternative A2c, and then calculate the annual reallocation.

Other comments did not support annual reallocation.

- NMFS should not use a fluctuating quota for the Purse Seine category.
- NMFS should consider the difference in minimum size between the Purse Seine and Longline categories.
- The Purse Seine category has not had the same fishing opportunities as other categories because the low availability of giant bluefin, the size of bluefin that Purse Seine fishermen can target.
- The Longline category will take the entire Purse Seine quota in the future.
- The annual reallocation alternative could lead to a greater number of discards because it provides additional quota to the Longline category rather than forcing the Longline category to reduce discards.

Modification to Reserve Category

Several comments support modification of the Reserve category (preferred Alternative A4b).

- NMFS should have the right to allocate from the Reserve category at any time.
- NMFS should split the Reserve category into underharvest and quota transferred from the Purse Seine category to increase transparency.
- NMFS should redistribute unused Reserve quota to active Longline category vessels during the last quarter.
- NMFS should make up to 50% of the Reserve quota available to the Longline category during the first three years of the IBQ system.

Other comments did not support modification of the Reserve category.

- NMFS should not add new criteria to existing in-season criteria.
- NMFS should not allow most of the Reserve quota to go to the Longline category.

B - Area Based Alternatives

Cape Hatteras Gear Restricted Area (GRA)

NMFS received a variety of comments supporting the five-month Cape Hatteras Pelagic Longline GRA (preferred Alternative B1c), with some suggested changes.

- NMFS should implement the GRA, but without conditional access (Alternative B1b).
- NMFS should expand the GRA to include the area north and east of the proposed area to address possible redistribution of fishing effort.
- NMFS should include a closed area in the Northeastern U.S. based on an option in the Predraft of Amendment 7.
- NMFS should implement dynamic gear restricted areas since the bluefin tuna distribution is variable.

- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should omit the southeast corner of the GRA based on the limited bluefin tuna interactions in that area; due to the Gulf Stream, the area affected by this GRA is larger than the area itself and gear can drift into the southeast corner.

NMFS received comments requesting alternative management actions instead of the Cape Hatteras GRA.

- NMFS should implement a full time/area closure instead of a GRA.
- NMFS should allow pelagic longline vessels to fish in this area using weak hooks and with observers.
- NMFS should allow access to this area in the spring during a period of favorable fishing conditions for yellowfin tuna, bigeye tuna, and swordfish.
- NMFS should consider the impact on fishermen in the area who do not have other fishing grounds.

NMFS received comments regarding access to the Cape Hatteras GRA based on performance.

- NMFS should not allow access to any GRA unless vessels have 100-percent observer coverage or electronic monitoring.
- NMFS should not include the performance metrics; one commenter stated that there was no regulation that vessels must avoid bluefin tuna and vessels should not be singled out for catching more bluefin by chance.
- NMFS should not penalize small vessels because of their inability of provide adequate space for observers.
- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should include all species in the logbook in the performance metrics, including dolphin/wahoo.
- NMFS should not base performance metrics on the Northeast Distant Area.
- NMFS should use the date received for the logbook performance metric.
- NMFS should not prohibit fishing in areas of concern until there are more reliable data collection methods than logbooks.
- NMFS should consider that, by allowing access based on the performance of a vessel, the new owner of a vessel may be evaluated based on prior poor vessel performance under a different owner.
- One commenter asked whether the public will know the identity of vessels excluded from the GRA.

Pelagic Longline Vessels Fishing in the General Category

NMFS received comments which support allowing pelagic longline vessels that are not allowed to fish in the Cape Hatteras GRA, to instead fish for bluefin tuna under General category rules (preferred Alternative B1d).

Other comments did not support pelagic longline vessels fishing in the General category.

- NMFS should not allow this because it would facilitate trans-shipment of bluefin from Longline category to General category vessels.

- NMFS should not expand a targeted bluefin tuna fishery in this area, given a high interaction rate and limited quota.
- NMFS should not allow limited access vessels to fish in an open access fishery without reciprocity; NMFS should consider the potential impacts on General category vessels.
- NMFS should consider whether replacement of pelagic longline gear with handlines is economically viable based on the size of the vessels as well as trip and other expenses.
- NMFS should allow all pelagic longline vessels to fish under the General category, not just those affected by the Cape Hatteras GRA.

Gulf of Mexico GRA

NMFS received several comments requesting that NMFS expand or move the proposed Small Gulf of Mexico GRA, in place from April through May (preferred Alternative B1f).

- NMFS should lengthen the duration of the gear restricted area to three months (March through May), four months (February through May), or six months (January through June; December through May).
- NMFS should expand the scope and duration of the GRA to encompass the full spawning season or area; the proposed GRA is not sufficient to account for uncertainties in the timing and area of bluefin spawning activity and longline fishing patterns from year to year.
- NMFS should implement the Gulf of Mexico Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) GRA, in place from March through May (Alternative B1e).
- NMFS should implement a Gulf of Mexico EEZ GRA from March through August, which would eliminate the need for Individual Bluefin Quotas (IBQs).
- NMFS should move the GRA to the south where there are more bluefin tuna interactions.
- NMFS should include an area in the eastern Gulf of Mexico to cover bluefin tuna spawning grounds described in a paper by Teo and Block, 2010.
- NMFS should include all Habitat Area of Particular Concern for bluefin tuna at a minimum within the Gulf of Mexico GRA, including the north central Gulf of Mexico.

NMFS received a number of comments raising concerns with the proposed Small Gulf of Mexico GRA.

- NMFS should consider the impact on the yellowfin tuna and swordfish fisheries, which are active in the proposed GRA, and whether the Gulf of Mexico pelagic longline fleet would be able to remain active.
- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council commented that NMFS should consider potential impacts on vessels using bottom longline gear.
- NMFS should consider the impacts of the GRA together with existing constraints on Gulf of Mexico fishing grounds due to seismograph vessels and oil rigs.
- NMFS should compensate vessels for the time period the GRA is in place.
- NMFS should implement performance standards in the Gulf of Mexico as in the proposed Cape Hatteras GRA.
- NMFS should not distinguish between bluefin tuna in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic as they are from the same breeding stock.

- NMFS should examine observer data in addition to logbook data to estimate bluefin tuna savings; the estimate of savings in 2010 and 2011 is low because fishing effort was low in those years.

Several commenters expressed support for the proposed Small Gulf of Mexico GRA.

- One commenter indicated that an additional benefit of the GRA would be savings of observer days that could be used to increase observer coverage in the Atlantic.
- NMFS should implement the GRA provided there is access to current closed areas using electronic monitoring.

Gear Measures

One commenter noted that NMFS should authorize vessels with a swordfish incidental permit to use buoy gear (Alternative B2b) in order to encourage longline vessels to switch to buoy gear.

Access to Pelagic Longline Closed Areas

NMFS received a variety of comments regarding limited conditional access to closed areas using pelagic longline gear (preferred Alternative B3b).

- NMFS should modify what is considered an “observer” to include electronic monitoring.
- NMFS should not consider a vessel sanctioned by the Office of Law Enforcement to be eligible for this program.
- NMFS should not consider logbook data for this program because it is not reliable and could reward under-reporting.
- NMFS should allow access to the Straits of Florida where vessels can fish without catching bluefin tuna.

Some commenters supported current regulations for existing closed areas (Alternative B3a).

- The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission commented that NMFS should not allow pelagic longline vessels in current closed areas in order to continue to protect juvenile billfish and swordfish; NMFS should also consider the impact on dusky sharks.
- NMFS should consider potential impacts on the recreational fishery if billfish stocks decline, particularly in DeSoto Canyon and the East Florida Coast, including loss of socioeconomic benefits.

C - Bluefin Tuna Quota Controls

Individual Bluefin Quotas (IBQs)

NMFS received a number of general comments on the IBQ system (preferred Alternative C2).

- NMFS should implement the IBQ system in order to hold vessels accountable and provide incentives to reduce discards.
- NMFS should be flexible, particularly in the short term, to ensure that the system is successful; small vessels need additional flexibility.
- NMFS should implement strict enforcement and fines associated with the IBQ system.

- NMFS should ensure that the annual distribution of quota takes place in time for the January 1 fishing season.
- NMFS should not allow carryforward of quota from year to year.
- NMFS should not implement the IBQ system because it is too complex and the price of quota is too high.
- NMFS should limit catch in the Gulf of Mexico using gear restrictions (e.g., limiting buoy gear) instead of the IBQ system.
- NMFS should consider the legality of diminishing a vessel's opportunity to catch its quota.
- NMFS should continue to support the swordfish pelagic longline fishery, which is a more important source of protein than bluefin; NMFS should consider impacts on the ability to maintain swordfish quota.
- NMFS should note that the bluefin population is growing, which has led to more dead discards; NMFS should consider what will happen to a vessel if they have a "disaster set."
- NMFS should consider unintended results of the IBQ system, such as creating a directed fishery for bluefin.
- NMFS should not give a public resource to individuals for their financial benefit.
- NMFS should not allow the pelagic longline fishery to profit from bluefin; proceeds should be used for other programs and research.
- NMFS should not allow vessels to land and sell bluefin without sufficient quota; money from bluefin sales should be put in escrow until quota is purchased to account for all catch.
- NMFS should limit the number of vessels that fish bluefin in other permit categories other than the Longline and Purse Seine categories.
- NMFS should maintain the current bluefin trip limit for vessels fishing in the Northeast Distant Area; when the trip limit is reached, NMFS should allow continued fishing with the vessel's IBQ.
- NMFS should maintain the 25-mt set-aside for pelagic longline vessels "in the vicinity of the area of the management boundary" at the 45° W longitude line, rather than provide the 25 mt to the entire Northeast Distant Area.
- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should first phase in GRAs and allocation requirements, and then implement IBQs.
- The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council commented that NMFS should address the IBQ system in a separate action after completing additional analyses.
- The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources commented that the proposed IBQ system is inconsistent with the Louisiana Coastal Resources Program; the IBQ system will have large socio-economic impacts on the Gulf of Mexico pelagic longline fishery, in which all catch is landed in Louisiana, with minimal benefits to bluefin stocks; the consistency determination lacks comprehensive data and information.

Vessels Eligible to Receive Bluefin Quota Shares

NMFS received comments on the management alternative stating that only active permitted Atlantic tuna longline vessels will be eligible to receive bluefin quota shares (preferred Alternative C2a.2).

- NMFS should provide quota to all vessels that have complied with permit requirements, even those that are inactive (Alternative C2a.1).

- NMFS should reconsider the criteria for determining the number of active vessels; the criteria is too lenient and results in a high number of vessels, not all of which are truly active.
- Several commenters suggested specific criteria for active vessels: 10 or 25 sets in the previous 12 months, determined in June of each year; 25 or 50 sets in the previous 3 years.
- NMFS should use an annual system to define eligible vessels.
- NMFS should consider the ability of new entrants to access the fishery; NMFS should consider the financial implications for equipment suppliers if new vessels do not have access.
- NMFS should address latent permits by eliminating the ability to reactivate those permits.
- NMFS should associate IBQ with a permit, not with a vessel.
- NMFS should use criteria such as income to measure dependence on commercial fishing.

Bluefin Quota Share Formulas

NMFS received comments supporting equal quota shares of bluefin (Alternative C2b.1).

- NMFS should consider that larger operations requiring more quota are best equipped to financially adjust to new regulations and that industry will adjust if quota is allocated equally.
- NMFS should allocate equal quota shares for active vessels so there is no need to rely on logbook data with possible under-reporting.

NMFS received comments on bluefin quota share formulas based on designated species and ratio of bluefin catch to HMS landings (preferred Alternative C2b.3).

- NMFS should raise total bluefin allocations; full-time vessels will not have enough to fish.
- NMFS should auction quota rather than award quota to avoid economic inefficiencies or rewarding dishonest reporting.
- NMFS should provide a higher quota allocation per vessel to the Longline category when compared to the amount of quota allocated to General category vessels; NMFS should consider that the General category sells much of their fish to Japan while the Longline category sells to U.S. consumers.
- NMFS should consider that there were lower than normal pelagic longline catches in recent years, due to the oil spill and storms, when determining allocations.
- NMFS should not base allocations on the time period that overlaps with the East Florida Closure.
- NMFS should not base allocations on logbook data; logbook data are inaccurate due to under-reporting and unfair because accurate reporters could be penalized; it is unfair to emphasize past performance since bluefin interactions were legal; past performance may not be a predictor of future performance.

Some comments describe alternative IBQ allocation formulas.

- NMFS should base allocations on the ratio of individual hooks or landings to total hooks or landings.
- NMFS should base allocations on the number of sets in the previous year, in increments of 25 sets.
- NMFS should use the proposed ratio for allocations, but base the calculations on information collected after publication of the Notice of Intent in April 2012; this will ease concerns raised

by the fact that there was no target catch requirement in the Northeast Distant Area prior to 2011.

- NMFS should allocate quota based on target species landings and fishing effort, since higher effort is likely to result in more bluefin catch.
- NMFS should award distant water vessels a prorated portion of their allocation in the EEZ.

Regional IBQ designations

NMFS received comments on regional designations and restrictions (preferred Alternative C2b.4), noting that NMFS should separate Gulf of Mexico quota and Atlantic quota.

Scope and Duration of Quota Trades

NMFS received comments on trade among pelagic longline and purse seine vessels (preferred Alternative C2c.2) and annual leasing of quota (preferred Alternative C2d.1). Some commenters support leasing in general, vessel-executed leasing, and unlimited leasing with no permanent sale of quota, as proposed.

Other commenters had concerns regarding leasing among pelagic longline and purse seine vessels.

- NMFS should not require fishermen to pay to fish.
- NMFS should consider the price of leasing, especially for small boat owners.
- NMFS should consider whether the low allocations will provide enough quota to lease.
- NMFS should consider that vessels may not want to lease quota to each other.
- NMFS should not provide additional access to quota for pelagic longline vessels; pelagic longline vessels could begin to target bluefin.
- NMFS should only allow Longline category vessels to lease quota.
- NMFS should allow the purse seine vessels to lease to all other categories.
- NMFS should only allow leasing to active vessels with intent to fish.
- NMFS should ensure that leasing will not disadvantage purse seine vessels in the following year.
- NMFS should set aside quota to be leased from the government, rather than allow purse seine vessels to lease.
- NMFS should not permit purse seine businesses to consolidate and control quota.
- NMFS should ensure that a fully functional trading infrastructure is in place before implementing the IBQ system.

IBQ Program Evaluation

NMFS received comments supporting an IBQ program evaluation after 3 years (preferred Alternative C2h.1). One commenter was concerned that NMFS will not actually evaluate the program, stating that the DeSoto Canyon time and area closure has not been re-evaluated.

Measures Associated with an IBQ

NMFS received comments supporting elimination of target catch requirements (preferred Alternative C21.1b). NMFS also received comments on mandatory retention of legal-sized bluefin that are dead at haul-back (preferred Alternative C21.2b).

- NMFS should require retention of legal-sized bluefin.
- NMFS should not require retention of bluefin in the Gulf of Mexico because the bluefin are too big to bring on board.
- NMFS should require retention of all dead discards regardless of size and all bluefin should count towards the quota.
- NMFS should eliminate any incentive to catch bluefin; vessels should not profit from the conversion of discards to landings.
- NMFS should address the problem of undersized juvenile bluefin discards from the pelagic longline fishery.

NMFS Closure of the Pelagic Longline Fishery

NMFS received comments on NMFS closure of the pelagic longline fishery (preferred Alternative C4b). Several commenters support NMFS closure whereas other commenters do not support closure of the pelagic longline fishery.

- NMFS should close the pelagic longline fishery when the current 8.1% allocation is met.
- NMFS should consider that if the pelagic longline fishery is closed early in the year (as early as February), the vessels and supporting businesses will go out of business; closure of this fishery will take away 50 million meals.
- NMFS should consider the implications for ICCAT and for optimal yield of target species if the pelagic longline fishery is closed.
- NMFS should only close the pelagic longline fishery after unusually high catch of bluefin, not when the quota is reached.

D - Enhanced Reporting Measures

Vessel Monitoring System Requirements

NMFS received comments on Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) requirements for the Purse Seine and Longline categories (preferred Alternative D1b) expressing both support and opposition.

- One commenter was concerned about VMS units operating as intended and which VMS company will be used.
- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should not implement VMS requirements until the current systems required in the mid-Atlantic function properly.

Electronic Monitoring

NMFS received comments on electronic monitoring of the Longline category (preferred Alternative D2b).

- NMFS should not require electronic monitoring; it is redundant with existing information; it does not increase accuracy or justify its cost; it is an invasion of privacy; it is cost prohibitive.
- NMFS should require electronic monitoring; it is not cost prohibitive; it allows NMFS to groundtruth other data; it supports enforcement and accountability.
- NMFS should require electronic monitoring for all categories with bluefin discards.
- NMFS should use electronic monitoring data for stock assessments.
- NMFS should first implement electronic monitoring on a pilot scale and set up functioning infrastructure.
- NMFS should limit electronic monitoring systems to one camera.
- NMFS should ensure that electronic monitoring will be able to distinguish between bluefin and bigeye tuna.

Automated Catch Reporting

NMFS received comments on automated catch reporting for Atlantic Tunas General, Harpoon, and HMS Charter/Headboat categories (preferred alternative D3b).

- NMFS should use a catch card system rather than automated reporting.
- NMFS should implement automated catch reporting of effort and dead discards in all categories.
- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources supports automated catch reporting but commented that NMFS should provide more information on the reporting system, verification, and data inputs.

Deployment of Observers

NMFS received comments on taking no action to change current observer coverage (preferred Alternative D4a).

- NMFS should increase observer coverage above 8 percent; NMFS should increase observer coverage to 60 or 100 percent; observers will be needed to monitor when the pelagic longline fishery needs to be closed.
- NMFS should implement industry-funded observer coverage.
- NMFS should consider whether observers will be able to cover trips into closed areas and collect protected species estimates.

Expand the Scope of the Large Pelagics Survey

One commenter opposes taking no action on the Large Pelagics Survey (preferred Alternative D6a), stating that a change is needed from the status quo.

E - Other Measures

General Category Time-Period Subquotas

NMFS received comments on allowing additional transfers of General category quota between time-period subquotas (preferred Alternative E1c).

- NMFS should allow more flexibility in the General category.
- NMFS should consider the fact that transfers will have the effect of moving quota from traditional Northeast fishery to the mid-Atlantic and South; Alternative E1c will negatively impact Northeast fishermen.
- NMFS should provide more quota to the January time period.
- NMFS should give a share of the quota to North Carolina to fish from January to June; the current 5.5 percent of quota in January to June is caught in less than 14 days.
- NMFS should take no action on General category time-period subquotas (Alternative E1a).
- NMFS should establish 12 equal monthly subquotas (Alternative E1b).
- The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources commented that NMFS should shift subquota for December to the January subquota period.
- NMFS should provide half the quota to the first half of the year and half the quota to the second half of the year.

Harpoon Category Retention Limits

NMFS received a comment supporting increased flexibility for the Harpoon category.

Angling Category Trophy Subquota Distribution

NMFS received comments on allocating a portion of the trophy south subquota to the Gulf of Mexico (preferred Alternative E3b).

- NMFS should not reduce the trophy south subquota; the reduction would affect charter captains; the change in allocation would increase landings of breeding bluefin in the Gulf of Mexico.
- NMFS should change the division of subquota, but not split the subquota equally between the southern area and the Gulf of Mexico; NMFS should allocate 10% or 17% to the Gulf of Mexico.
- NMFS should eliminate the trophy category because it is not possible to monitor the catch.
- The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council commented that NMFS should take no action on the Angling category trophy subquota (Alternative E3a); Alternative E3b would lead to an unreasonably small recreational bluefin trophy quota for the northern region.

Purse Seine Category Start Date

NMFS received comments on changing the start date of the Purse Seine category to June 1 (preferred Alternative E4b).

- NMFS should change the Purse Seine category start date to June 1; fish are found in the south earlier than July 15.
- NMFS should give the Purse Seine category the same start date as other commercial categories.
- NMFS should give the Purse Seine category a start date of June 15 if there is a need to compromise with other categories.

- NMFS should not change the start date; the average value of bluefin is lower in June.

Rules Regarding Permit Category Changes

One commenter does not support modifying the rules regarding permit category changes (preferred Alternative E5b), stating that the 10-day restriction is sufficient and changing the restriction would give people the chance to abuse the rules and fish in multiple categories.

Northern Atlantic Albacore Tuna Quota

NMFS received a comment on implementing a U.S. northern Atlantic albacore tuna quota (preferred Alternative E6b), stating that NMFS should be cautious on carrying forward multiple years of underharvest given the status of the northern albacore stock.

Pelagic and Bottom Longline Transiting Closed Areas

The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources supported preferred Alternative E8b.

Other Comments

- NMFS should implement a minimum size of 73 inches for the Purse Seine category to be consistent with other commercial categories; NMFS should have an allowable percentage tolerance of small fish for all categories.
- NMFS should increase research efforts and communication between scientists and managers.
- NMFS should reevaluate methods for stock assessments, dead discards estimates, and extrapolation of observer-generated data; NMFS should assess stocks in real time.
- NMFS should not consider green-stick gear to be a viable alternative to pelagic longline gear, particularly in the Gulf of Mexico.
- NMFS should consider alternative methods that reduce soak time in order to decrease dead discards; NMFS should promote use of de-hooking devices in order to increase survivability.
- NMFS should consider opening DeSoto Canyon and the Florida East Closure.
- NMFS should reduce the Longline category minimum size for bluefin to the ICCAT minimum size.
- NMFS should ensure U.S. regulations are precautionary in order to lead international bluefin management; NMFS should ensure U.S. regulations are not more restrictive than those of other countries.
- The National Park Service supports allocations of zero harvest for bluefin and albacore tuna within individual national parks, which would allow recreational catch-and-release fishing within parks while monitoring systems are put in place.
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) commented that the draft Environmental Impact Statement provides an adequate discussion of the potential environmental impacts and the EPA has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes.