

3.0 SUMMARY

This document is a combined fishery management plan (FMP), regulatory impact review (RIR), final environmental impact statement (FEIS) and initial regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA) for Atlantic billfishes. The FEIS, RIR and IRFA describe the probable consequences of each of the proposed management measures and alternatives considered. The FMP was prepared under the authority of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 as amended, the RIR in accordance with the requirements of Executive Order 12291, the FEIS in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the IRFA in accordance with the Regulatory Flexibility Act.

The Billfish Fishery Management Plan was prepared jointly by the South Atlantic, New England, Mid-Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Fishery Management Councils. It establishes a management regime for Atlantic billfishes throughout the Atlantic, Gulf and Caribbean Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the U.S. The species addressed by this plan are the sailfish, Istiophorus platypterus; the white marlin, Tetrapturus albidus; the blue marlin, Makaira nigricans; and the longbill spearfish, Tetrapturus pfluegeri. When approved and implemented by the Secretary of Commerce, this FMP will incorporate the billfish-related aspects of the Preliminary Fishery Management Plan (PMP) for Atlantic Billfishes and Sharks which is currently in effect. Atlantic sharks will remain governed by the PMP until a fishery management plan is developed for them.

The objectives of the plan are to:

- A. Maintain the highest availability of billfishes to the U.S. recreational fishery by implementing conservation measures that will reduce fishing mortality.
- B. Optimize the social and economic benefits to the nation by reserving the billfish resource for its traditional use which on the continental U.S. is almost entirely a recreational fishery. In the Caribbean, the fishery is both a recreational and small-scale handline fishery where billfishes are used as food.
- C. Increase understanding of the condition of the billfish stocks and the billfish fishery.

Optimum yield in the billfish fishery is defined as the greatest number of billfish that can be caught by the recreational fishery in the EEZ, consistent with the provisions of this fishery management plan, considering the biological limitations of the stock and the unavoidable incidental catches in other fisheries.

On the basis of data presented in this plan and in the Source Document, it is concluded that the greatest overall benefit to the nation will result from reserving to the extent possible, billfish occurring in the EEZ to the U.S. recreational fishery. Consequently, only traditional recreational fishing gear (i.e., rod and reel) may be used in a directed fishery for billfishes in the Atlantic and Gulf EEZs. To ensure that a commercial market for billfishes does not develop, thus thwarting the objectives of this plan, the sale of all species in the management unit (i.e., from the same stock) is

prohibited. This measure applies to imports as well as billfishes caught by domestic vessels fishing outside the EEZ. In Puerto Rico, where billfishes have traditionally been used for food, the use of handlines in the small-scale fishery will continue. Billfish of any size taken in this fishery may be sold only in Puerto Rico. However, to ensure that the exemption is confined to the artisanal fishery, a maximum of 100 billfish may be landed annually under this exemption in addition to permitting and monitoring requirements. This is the only exception to the prohibition on sale.

Billfish are also an incidental bycatch of domestic pelagic longline fisheries. With the expansion of the swordfish fishery into more southern waters, and the rapidly growing domestic tuna fishery, the incidental catch of billfishes has increased markedly. To ensure that all live billfishes caught incidentally by these fisheries are released, retention by commercial longline vessels is prohibited. Therefore, all billfish caught by domestic longliners must be released by cutting the line near the hook, without removing the fish from the water.

The U.S. recreational fishery currently releases approximately 50 percent of its catch. However, to ensure that most billfishes are released so that they may remain available to the recreational fishery, minimum size limits are imposed for each species (except spearfish). Size limits are based on weight, but are expressed in lower jaw fork length. The minimum sizes are 57 inches (30 pounds) for sailfish, 62 inches (50 pounds) for white marlin, and 86 inches (200 pounds) for blue marlin, and are based on reducing angler retention by 30 percent, 50 percent and 50 percent respectively. This measure will allow competitive fishing tournaments and retention of trophy size fish to continue while still significantly reducing this source of billfish mortality.

No permits or fees will be required for domestic vessels engaged in the fishery. Domestic catch and effort information necessary for monitoring the impacts of the plan and the status of the billfish resource will be collected by statistically sampling participants in the fishery. Mandatory reporting of billfish catch and effort will be required of all billfish tournaments selected by NMFS. Commercial longline fisheries will be sampled by use of logbooks and onboard observers.

All billfish taken on foreign longline gear must be released in a manner which will ensure maximum probability of survival. However, there has been a high mortality of billfishes taken on foreign longline gear (only 40 percent were released alive from March 1978 to March 1979) and significant bycatches of billfish by the foreign longline fishery occur during those months when domestic recreational activity is most intense. For these reasons and in order to provide for the highest availability of billfishes to the U.S. fishery, the area closures specified in the PMP will be continued.

Foreign fishing vessels having permits to operate longlines or other gear likely to catch billfishes within the Exclusive Economic Zone will be required to carry observers and keep daily records of the total number of billfish caught and the number released alive.

Although this management plan attempts to maximize the number of billfishes available to U.S. recreational fishermen by reducing fishing mortality on billfish within the EEZ, it is

recognized that effective biological management must treat billfish stocks throughout their range. Therefore implementation of an international management plan for billfishes is recommended to complement the management initiatives undertaken within the EEZ.

4.0 THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT UNIT

Sailfish, Istiophorus platypterus in the west Atlantic Ocean; white marlin, Tetrapturus albidus in the North Atlantic Ocean; blue marlin, Makaira nigricans in the North Atlantic Ocean; and the longbill spearfish, Tetrapturus pfluegeri in the entire Atlantic Ocean comprise the management unit of this plan. These species are interrelated from the standpoint of both biology and the fishery. This plan establishes a management regime for these interrelated stocks throughout that portion of their range which is in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Exclusive Economic Zones of the U.S. and recommends establishment of a complementary international management program applicable to the entire range of the stocks.

Unit stocks of billfishes are not contained within the EEZ. Consequently, the long-term biological productivity of billfish resources is dependent on management through international agreements. Despite the presumed stock structure, mark-recapture data indicate that most billfish do not make trans-Atlantic or trans-equatorial migrations. Thus, the impact of management measures within the EEZ will be largely on these relatively resident fish and not diluted stock-wide. In view of this, the significant social and economic value of the domestic billfish fishery, and the competition for the available resource within the EEZ, management to achieve the optimum yield from the fishery within the EEZ is desirable. This management regime should complement any biological management initiatives undertaken through international arrangements. In addition, management measures contained in this plan will provide some protection to the stocks and may encourage other nations to undertake management.

The plan primarily addresses the two marlins and the sailfish. There is no domestic directed fishery for the longbill spearfish and available data suggest this species is scarce within the U.S. EEZ. However, it is occasionally taken in the recreational fishery for marlins and sailfish and is therefore included in the management unit.

5.0 PROBLEMS IN THE FISHERY

The principal problems in the fishery which the management plan will address are:

- A. There is intense competition for the available resource between the recreational fishery for billfish and other fisheries that have a bycatch of billfish.
- B. There is a developing commercial market for billfish and an increasing value for the product, thus encouraging directed fishing and/or increased retention of incidentally caught billfish. This situation jeopardizes the economically valuable, traditional