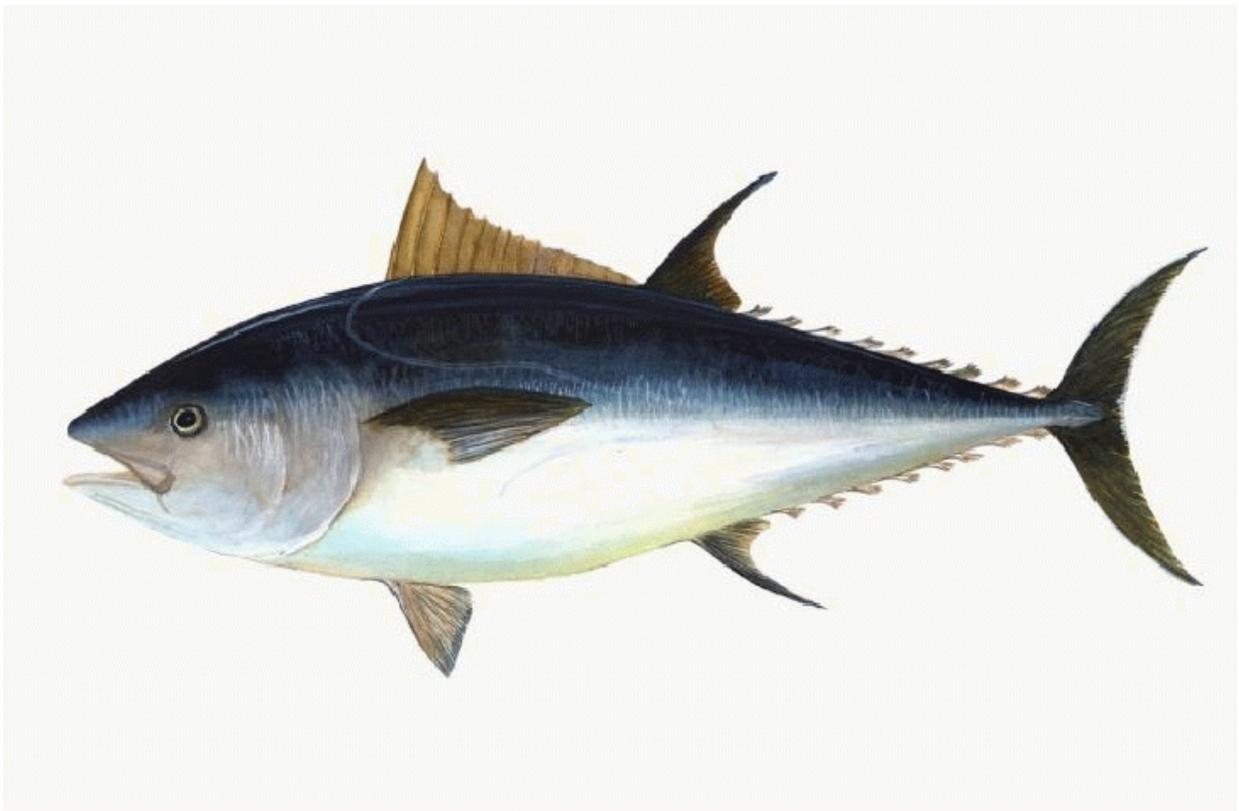


2003 STOCK ASSESSMENT AND FISHERY EVALUATION FOR ATLANTIC HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service



2003 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species

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All documents cited in the SAFE report, as well as additional copies of the report, are available from the Highly Migratory Species Management Division, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service:

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Dealer Permits:

Tuna dealer permits are issued out of the Northeast Regional Office of NOAA Fisheries (978-281-9370), shark and swordfish dealer permits are issued out of the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

Charter/Headboat Permits, Atlantic Tuna Permits & Recreational HMS Vessel Permits:

Questions regarding the Charter/Headboat permit, the Atlantic tunas permit, or recreational HMS vessel permit processes should be directed to Aquilent Customer Service at (888) 872-8862, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern Time. Fishermen may also listen to or view updates to the regulations via the toll-free automated telephone system or the website (www.nmfspermits.com).

Atlantic Shark and Swordfish Permits:

Questions regarding renewals or transfers of shark and swordfish limited access permits should be directed to the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report provides a summary of the best available scientific information on the condition of stocks, marine ecosystems, and fisheries being managed under federal regulation. Consistent with the guidelines for National Standard 2 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the SAFE report is prepared annually and used as a reference in the evaluation and refinement of fisheries management practices. The report updates the data necessary to determine appropriate annual harvest levels, documents significant trends in the resource, marine ecosystems, and fisheries over time, and identifies associated bycatch and safety issues. Through a comprehensive annual update of key biological, economic, and social indicators, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) can ensure use of the best available scientific data in its decision making process.

The 2003 SAFE report for Highly Migratory Species (HMS) includes the latest stock assessment data, recommendations, and resolutions from the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and their Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) through December 2002. The report further contains the latest domestic shark stock assessment data. The report is divided into the following ten sections: Introduction; Stock Assessment Update; Essential Fish Habitat; Fishery Data Update; Economic Status of HMS Fisheries; Community and Social Data Update; Fish Processing, Industry and Trade; Bycatch; HMS Permits; and Issues for Consideration and Outlook.

Stock Assessment Update

In 2002, the SCRS conducted new stock assessments for bigeye tuna, East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna, western Atlantic bluefin tuna, North and South Atlantic swordfish, and white marlin. Eastern and western Atlantic bluefin tuna, North Atlantic Albacore, Atlantic blue and white marlin, West Atlantic sailfish, and North Atlantic swordfish remain overfished, and bigeye tuna may be overfished. It should be noted that North Atlantic swordfish stocks have made significant progress toward rebuilding. Yellowfin tuna and South Atlantic swordfish are considered fully fished.

Also in 2002, the United States conducted stock assessments on Atlantic large and small coastal sharks. The large coastal shark (LCS) stock assessment indicated that, in aggregate, the complex is overfished and overfishing is occurring. The assessment further indicated that sandbar sharks are no longer overfished (although they have not reached optimum yield), but continue to experience overfishing. A determination was made that blacktip sharks are neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The small coastal shark (SCS) stock assessment determined that the SCS complex is not overfished as a whole, but did indicate that overfishing is occurring for finetooth sharks. NOAA Fisheries must now reduce fishing mortality for finetooth sharks.

Essential Fish Habitat

Several joint federal/state surveys of shark nursery and pupping grounds along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts were described in papers released during 2002. Also, the second phase of an investigation focused on Atlantic blue marlin spawning and nursery habitat utilization was implemented in 2002 with considerable success. Programs to track movements of adult and juvenile Atlantic bluefin tuna utilizing pop-up tags, archival tags, and ultrasonic depth-sensitive transmitters continued in 2002.

Fishery Data Update

There are multiple sources of information concerning HMS fisheries, including mandatory commercial and recreational permits, observer reports, mandatory logbook reporting in some fisheries, dealer reports, recreational surveys and reporting requirements, and an HMS tournament database. In this document, data are analyzed by gear type to more easily assess the implications for each these multi-species fisheries. Some of the more important developments regarding fishery data from 2002 are:

- Northeast distant statistical area pelagic longline experimental fishery
- HMS Angling Category permits requirement
- Continuation of HMS tournament registration
- Vessel monitoring systems
- Shark emergency rule and notice of intent to amend shark regulations
- LCS and SCS stock assessments
- New ICCAT assessments of a number of species
- HMS vessel logbook and cost-earnings reporting

Economic Status of HMS Fisheries

The 2003 SAFE report includes a section on the economic status of commercial and recreational HMS fisheries. Prior to 2002, this information was presented in association with various gear types, but the 2002 and 2003 reports combine all available economic information into one section, including: production (U.S. and international); ex-vessel prices; wholesale prices; fishing costs and revenues for commercial fisheries; costs and revenues for dealers; recreational fishing; and charter/headboat fisheries. In addition, this section provides a review of

selected rules that had, or are expected to have, a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities under the Regulatory Flexibility Act.

Community and Social Data Update

Analyses relative to National Standard 8 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act rely heavily on the availability of community studies and profiles. As HMS are highly migratory resources by definition, fishermen often tend to shift locations in an attempt to follow the fish. The inclusion of typical community profiles in HMS management decisions is somewhat difficult and continued social and community studies to identify the participants in these fisheries are of great importance. This section of the SAFE report includes an overview of current information and provides a summary of new research, including a social and economic examination of the fishing ports and coastal counties along the mid-Atlantic coast. This section also provides a summary of expected community and social impacts of agency actions completed during 2002.

Fish Processing, Industry and Trade

Domestic and international consumer preference continues to play a large role in HMS markets. The Fish Processing, Industry and Trade section provides an overview of U.S. trade activities relative to HMS, required documentation, and summaries of U.S. imports and exports of HMS products. Bluefin tuna trade remains strictly monitored through use of the Bluefin Statistical Document program. Sharks and shark products continue to be an important export, although the nature of reporting is much less detailed than that used for bluefin tuna. Swordfish are an important import into the United States, as indicated by data collected through the Swordfish Import Monitoring Program. Consistent with ICCAT recommendations, the United States is currently working toward implementation of a swordfish and bigeye tuna statistical document. The use of trade data to supplement existing information sources is an new important tool in the monitoring and management of HMS.

Bycatch

Bycatch and bycatch mortality of finfish, and incidental catches and fishing-induced mortality of marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds continue to be issues of great concern in the management of HMS. NOAA Fisheries and commercial fishermen conducted research in the pelagic longline fishery to address sea turtle interactions during 2002 to ensure compliance with the HMS FMP and a recent Biological Opinion (BO) on HMS fisheries. NOAA Fisheries is currently evaluating the efficacy of recently implemented time-area closures in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico intended to reduce bycatch and discards in the pelagic longline fishery. In an effort to minimize discards of bluefin tuna, NOAA Fisheries has recently proposed to modify minimum target catch requirements for Atlantic bluefin tuna caught incidentally to pelagic longlining activities (67 FR 78404, December 24, 2002). To better account for bycatch mortality in the fishery for Atlantic sharks, NOAA Fisheries reinstated the requirement to count dead

discards against commercial quotas as of January 1, 2003. A particularly challenging aspect of effectively addressing bycatch issues in HMS fisheries is the international component. The United States continues to work through ICCAT to address bycatch issues on an Atlantic-wide basis.

HMS Permits

NOAA Fisheries continues to explore effective and equitable means to address overcapitalization problems. As of October 2002, there were 627 total shark permit holders (directed, incidental), 409 total swordfish permit holders (directed, incidental, handgear), and 226 current tuna pelagic longline permit holders. However, those participating in the directed swordfish fishery must also possess a limited access shark permit and a tuna pelagic longline permit, so the cumulative number of permits does not reflect the actual number of participants. This section provides additional management actions that may be considered to further reduce the number of permits, if deemed necessary. Options for upgrading and safety issues are also discussed.

NOAA Fisheries has made significant improvements to its Atlantic tunas permitting system, including a website where constituents can purchase and renew permits for Atlantic tunas, update permit information, and report recreational landings of bluefin tuna (www.nmfspermits.com). Increasing the level of automation in the permitting process as well as the methods of renewal (i.e., phone, fax, internet) is expected to improve constituent satisfaction and reduce administrative costs. NOAA Fisheries hopes to build upon this success and consider automating other HMS permitting processes in the future.

Issues for Consideration and Outlook

In 2003, NOAA Fisheries plans to continue implementing and evaluating the FMP measures in an attempt to rebuild stocks, address overfishing, and eliminate overcapitalization problems that affect many HMS fisheries. The HMS Management Division expects to implement VMS requirements for Atlantic pelagic longline vessels, and finalize decision-making regarding bluefin tuna incidental catch landing requirements. The agency anticipates finalizing statistical documents for bigeye tuna and swordfish to comply with international obligations. The HMS Management Division further expects to conduct in-depth examinations of, and potentially undertake rulemaking regarding, Atlantic bluefin tuna allocations, the start date for Atlantic bluefin tuna purse seine fishery, and an HMS FMP amendment regarding Atlantic sharks. In the longer-term, NOAA Fisheries intends to move forward with the collection of information, evaluation, and planning for a number of other issues including consideration for the need to update or redesignate EFH for HMS, possible extension of NED experimental measures to minimize sea turtle interactions, evaluating novel fishing gears and techniques, improving and expanding observer programs, amending the regulations pertaining to limited access permits and expanding the selection process for vessel logbook and cost earnings reporting. The HMS Management Division will also seek to improve constituent services and ease reporting burdens

by designing and implementing web-based tournament registration and both tournament and non-tournament reporting.

The 2003 HMS Advisory Panel meeting provides an excellent opportunity to discuss these and other issues raised in the SAFE report which may require further action. Through continuous public and constituent interaction, increased monitoring, ongoing life history work, and additional socio-economic assessment, NOAA Fisheries strives to continue building sustainable fisheries for all Atlantic HMS.

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