

**STOCK ASSESSMENT AND FISHERY
EVALUATION (SAFE) REPORT
FOR
ATLANTIC
HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES**



2004

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



**Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report
for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species**

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U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
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January 2004

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This document is available at the following internet address:
<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/hmsdocuments.html#safe>. All documents cited in the SAFE report, as well as additional hard copies of the report, are available from the following address:

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Dealer Permits:

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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 annual 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 (Magnuson-Stevens Act), the SAFE report is used as a reference in the evaluation and refinement of fisheries management practices. The report summarizes the best scientific data necessary to determine appropriate annual harvest levels, document significant trends in the resource, marine ecosystems, and fisheries over time, and identify associated bycatch and safety issues. These data may be used in the decision-making process for future regulations.

The 2004 SAFE report for Highly Migratory Species (HMS) differs slightly from previous year's reports. Instead of a stand alone document, the 2004 SAFE report serves as an addendum to the 2003 SAFE report, and should be considered in conjunction with the 2003 report. This addendum updates information from 2003 and includes the latest stock assessment data, recommendations, and resolutions from the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and its Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) through December 2003. The SAFE report also contains a full chapter updating the work of the HMS Management Division of NOAA Fisheries on bycatch (Section 8). Additional data will be included, as it becomes available, in Amendment 2 to the Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Tunas, Swordfish and Sharks (HMS FMP) and Amendment 2 to the Atlantic Billfish FMP. The 2004 report is divided into ten sections that are similar in structure to the 2003 SAFE report to provide for easy cross-referencing. These sections are discussed briefly below.

Stock Assessment Update

With the exception of Atlantic sharks, stock assessments for Atlantic HMS are conducted by ICCAT's SCRS. In 2003, the SCRS conducted stock assessments for South Atlantic albacore (not considered part of the HMS management unit and thus not included in the HMS FMP) and yellowfin tuna. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) expects ICCAT to conduct a stock assessment on pelagic sharks, particularly blue, porbeagle, and shortfin mako sharks, among other species, in 2004. Other stock assessment information for HMS species will be included as it becomes available in Amendment 2 to the HMS FMP (draft expected in 2004).

Essential Fish Habitat

Essential fish habitat (EFH) work continued throughout 2003 with an emphasis on tagging projects and programs for Atlantic sharks, billfish and bluefin tuna. Amendment 1 to the HMS FMP updated EFH for five species of sharks. In 2004, EFH updates for all Atlantic HMS for which new information is available will be included in Amendment 2 to the HMS FMP and Amendment 2 to the Atlantic Billfish FMP.

Fishery Data Update

_____ In this document, fishery dependent data are analyzed by gear type to more easily assess the implications for each of these multi-species fisheries, and updated information is presented in table format and should be used in conjunction with the 2003 SAFE Report. The 2003 report provides a full description of HMS gear types and fisheries.

Economic Status of HMS Fisheries

The 2004 SAFE report includes a section on the economic status of commercial and recreational HMS fisheries. Information in this section includes 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. This SAFE Report updates 2002 information regarding ex-vessel prices and total ex-vessel values in table format, for use with the 2003 SAFE Report. A full description of economic information sources is given in the 2003 SAFE Report.

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. This section of the SAFE report provides a summary of selected rules' socio-economic impacts. A brief bibliography of recent social science publications is given in Section 6 of the 2003 SAFE report.

Fish Processing, Industry and Trade

Domestic and international consumer preference continues to play a large role in HMS markets. Section 7 provides an overview of U.S. trade activities relative to HMS, required documentation, and summaries of U.S. imports and exports of HMS products. The use of trade data to supplement existing information sources is a new and important tool in the monitoring and management of HMS. Tables updating the 2003 SAFE report with 2003 trade data on tuna, shark, and swordfish are provided.

Bycatch

Bycatch and bycatch mortality of finfish, as well as 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. An HMS bycatch reduction plan was developed in late 2003 which identifies priority issues to be addressed in the following areas: (1) monitoring, (2) research, (3) management, and (4) education/outreach. Individual activities in each of these areas will be undertaken during 2004-05 and new activities may be added or removed as they are addressed or identified. This section of the 2004 SAFE Report includes an extensive discussion on the results of various bycatch reduction efforts as a result of time/area closures. A brief

evaluation of other bycatch reduction measures as well as bycatch reduction of HMS species in other fisheries is also included.

HMS Permits

NOAA Fisheries continues to monitor capacity in HMS fisheries. Updated vessel and dealer permit numbers for HMS fisheries as of October 2003 are included in Section 9. The overall number of limited access permits for Atlantic swordfish, tunas and sharks declined slightly in 2003. The overall number of tuna vessel permits increased in some categories and declined in others. The HMS angling permit requirement went into effect on March 1, 2003. The overall number of dealer permits increased as a result of an increase in tuna dealers. Additional information on HMS permit programs can be found in the 2003 SAFE Report.

NOAA Fisheries continues to modify and make significant improvements to its Atlantic tunas permitting system, including the 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. The planned amendment for the HMS FMP is expected to analyze the current permitting system and consider alternatives to further improve the existing program.

Issues for Consideration and Outlook

_____ In 2004, NOAA Fisheries plans to continue implementing and evaluating FMP measures in an attempt to rebuild stocks, address overfishing, and eliminate overcapitalization in HMS fisheries. The major effort planned for 2004 is a second Amendment to the HMS FMP. Issues that may be addressed in this amendment are reviewed in Section 10.

The 2004 HMS Advisory Panel meeting, scheduled for February 2004, 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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