



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NMFS ANNOUNCES AVAILABILITY OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH USING PELAGIC LONGLINE GEAR IN THE EAST FLORIDA COAST (EFC) AND CHARLESTON BUMP CLOSED AREAS

NMFS announces the availability of an Environmental Assessment (EA) to conduct research using a limited number of pelagic longline (PLL) vessels in portions of the East Florida Coast (EFC) and Charleston Bump closed areas (Figure 1). Given the nearly rebuilt status of north Atlantic swordfish and recent bycatch reduction measures (e.g., circle hook requirements, bait requirements, bycatch release gear, and protected species handling and release workshops) that were implemented throughout the U.S. PLL fishery, NMFS proposes to collect baseline PLL fishery data in the closed areas to evaluate the effectiveness of existing bycatch reduction measures. The EA analyzes monthly and annual PLL logbook and pelagic observer program (POP) data on catch and bycatch rates of all species in the proposed research area from 1995-2000 to determine potential impacts of the research fishery on target and non-target species.

No PLL fishing has been authorized in the closed areas since 2001, and NMFS has not collected information since that time on the effectiveness of current bycatch reduction measures in closed areas where bycatch rates may be higher than in other areas. In July 2004, NMFS implemented regulations requiring all PLL vessels to use specific size circle hooks, bait types, safe release tools and protocols in place of traditional J-hooks as management measures to reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality. The proposed research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of those bycatch reduction measures, and to collect baseline data on current PLL fishing activities within portions of the FEC and Charleston Bump closed areas. Specifically, NMFS seeks to determine the effectiveness of 18/0 circle hooks in closed areas where the potential for bycatch is greater than in open areas.

As described in the EA, based on analysis of PLL and Pelagic Observer Program (POP) data from 1995-2000, prior to the closures and circle hook requirements going into effect, a limited number of interactions with leatherback sea turtles (4 based on PLL data and 6 based on POP data over 6 years) and loggerhead sea turtles (5 based on PLL data and 12 based on POP data over 6 years) occurred in the proposed research area. Based on a worst case scenario using estimates from the POP data and applying anticipated fishing effort in the research fishery to pre-closure J-hook catch rates, 2 leatherback and 6 loggerhead sea turtle interactions may occur as a result of the research fishery. Given the significantly lower interaction and mortality rates of Atlantic sea turtles with circle hooks, this action is not expected to significantly increase fishery interactions with, or mortalities of, sea turtles.

For highly migratory species (HMS), based on pre-closure J-hook data, an estimated 1,083 swordfish are expected be retained, 973 discarded alive, and 360 discarded dead, zero (0) bluefin tuna are expected be kept or discarded, 22 white marlin and 24 blue marlin are expected to be discarded, 113 large coastal sharks are expected to be retained and 174 discarded, and 21 pelagic



and 174 discarded, and 21 pelagic sharks are expected to be retained and 92 discarded. Given the known and anticipated mortality reduction benefits of circle hooks for Atlantic HMS relative to J-hooks, the estimates of dead discards above are likely over estimates. As such, this action is not expected to significantly increase the retention or bycatch of HMS.

NMFS invites comments from interested parties on the EA, and on the Agency's intent to issue an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) during the fall or winter of 2007. The comment period will be open until November 20, 2007. Comments should be submitted to Margo Schulze-Haugen, Highly Migratory Species Management Division (F/SF1), Office of Sustainable Fisheries, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Comments may also be sent via facsimile to 301-713-1917 or by email to PLL_ResearchEA@noaa.gov. Please include in the subject line of the email the following identifier: PLL Research EA.

This notice is a courtesy to individuals interested in Atlantic HMS fisheries and issues to keep you informed about your fishery. Official notice of Federal fishery actions is made through filing such notice with the Office of the Federal Register. For further information or a copy of the Notice published in the Federal Register concerning this activity, please contact Chris Rilling at 301-713-2347 or Russell Dunn at 727-824-5399.


for Alan Risenhoover, Director
Office of Sustainable Fisheries

11/5/2007
Date

Figure 1. Proposed research area shown in hashed marks.

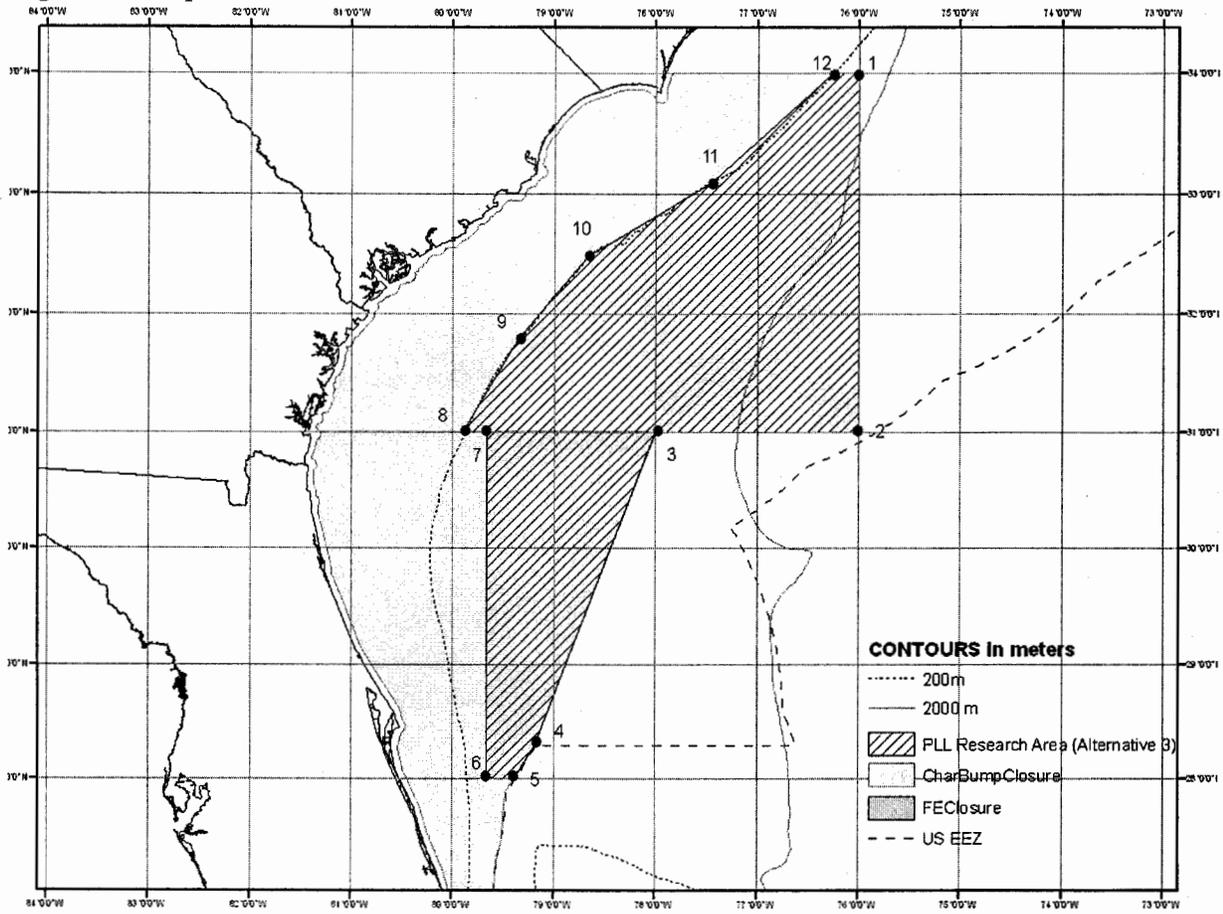


Table 1. Coordinates of proposed research area beginning with location number 1 and proceeding clockwise to location number 12.

Point	Latitude			Longitude		
	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds
1	34	0	0	76	0	0"
2	31	0	0	76	0	0
3	31	0	0	78	0	0
4	28	17	6.8	79	11	54.5
5	28	0	0	79	23	47.9
6	28	0	0	79	40	0
7	31	0	0	79	40	0
8	31	0	0	79	54	38.9
9	31	47	7.2	79	21	50.5
10	32	29	12.1	78	40	21.0
11	33	5	35.8	77	27	15.7
12	34	0	0	76	15	26.5