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NOAA seeks comments on Atlantic bluefin tuna management proposals
Draft Amendment 7 aims to reduce bycatch discards

NOAA Fisheries is seeking public comment on a proposed rule and its associated draft environmental impact statement, which aims to reduce discards of Atlantic bluefin tuna, and outlines measures to help ensure compliance with international quotas.

The draft environmental impact statement includes the ecological and socioeconomic analyses of the amendment.

“All those involved in the bluefin tuna fishery -- scientists, managers, fishers and environmentalists -- share a common concern about the large number of dead discards of incidentally caught bluefin tuna,” said Sam Rauch, acting assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA Fisheries. “The proposed measures that filed today underscore the nation’s commitment to sustainable, science-based management of this vital fish stock. These proposed rules help to end overfishing and are consistent with the rebuilding program for western Atlantic bluefin tuna.”

The proposed measures in the draft of Amendment 7 to the Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan, are designed to control bluefin tuna landings and dead discards in the pelagic longline fishery, enhance reporting in all bluefin tuna fisheries, and ensure U.S. compliance with binding recommendations of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT).

These proposed measures include:

- Revising bluefin quota allocations among the fishery participants to increase the allocation to the longline fishery, because dead discards will now be counted against their individual vessel allocations;
- Allocating individual shares of bluefin catch (landings and dead discards) to increase accountability and reduce dead discards in the longline fishery;
- Enhancing reporting requirements to improve accounting for dead discards in all bluefin tuna fisheries;
- Allowing longline fishermen who have demonstrated their ability to avoid bluefin while fishing for swordfish and other tunas to fish in areas where many bluefin are found, and restricting fishermen who cannot avoid bluefin from those areas, and;
- Prohibiting pelagic longline fishing for all species when the longline bluefin quota is reached.

Under these proposed measures, fishermen will have a strong incentive to avoid catching bluefin tuna incidentally when pursuing swordfish and other Atlantic tunas, since bluefin tuna

catch (landings and dead discards) are proposed to be counted against individual longline vessels. Reaching the bluefin quota could result in prohibition of further longline fishing.

Atlantic bluefin tuna, *Thunnus thynnus*, is regarded as one of the most important and prized species in the ocean. Weighing in upwards of 550 pounds and reaching more than six feet long, bluefin tuna are near the top of the ocean food chain, giving them an important role in the marine ecosystem. They are also extremely valuable on the commercial market, which makes them particularly vulnerable to unreported and unregulated fishing internationally.

NOAA Fisheries has identified bluefin tuna as a species of concern, but it is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

NOAA Fisheries will hold numerous public hearings for this action along the Atlantic Coast, and in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico regions until the comment period closes on October 23.

During these hearings, NOAA Fisheries will accept public comments on the proposed management measures. Dates, times and locations of the public hearings will be announced at a later date. In addition, NOAA Fisheries will consult with the Highly Migratory Species Advisory Panel at its public meeting at the Sheraton Silver Spring Hotel in Silver Spring, Md., September 9 through 12.

Comments may be submitted (identified by "NOAA-NMFS-2013-0101") through October 23, by using any one of the following methods:

- Electronic Submissions: Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to <http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=NOAA-NMFS-2013-0101>, click the "Comment Now!" icon, complete the required fields, and enter
- or attach your comments.
- Mail: Thomas Warren, Highly Migratory Species Management Division, NOAA Fisheries, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930
- Fax: 978-281-9340, Attn: Thomas Warren

Copies of the proposed rule and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement are available upon request from the NOAA Fisheries Highly Migratory Species Management Division at 978-281-9260, and online at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>.