

**Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation for
Atlantic Highly Migratory Species
2002**

U.S. Department of Commerce
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National Marine Fisheries Service
Office of Sustainable Fisheries
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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 NMFS (978-281-9370), shark and swordfish dealer permits are issued out of the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

Atlantic Tuna Permits:

Questions regarding the Atlantic tunas permit process should be directed to Commerce One 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 NMFS Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

Charter/Headboat Permits:

Questions regarding the Highly Migratory Species Charter/Headboat permit process should be directed to Commerce One 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).

HMS Infoline and Website

Information on regulations, public meetings, and landings reports can be obtained from the HMS Infoline at (800) 894-5528 or the website (www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hmspg.html).

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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 (Magnuson-Stevens 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 resources, 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 (NMFS) can ensure use of the best available scientific data in its decision making process.

The 2002 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 2001. The report is divided into the following nine sections: 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

The SCRS conducted a stock assessment for sailfish and spearfish in 2001. However, quantitative assessment models were not able to provide satisfactory or reliable stock information. New analyses do not provide any information on the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) or other stock benchmarks for Western Atlantic composite (sailfish/spearfish) or sailfish-only stock. Yet, recent catch levels for composite and sailfish only stocks appear sustainable because over the past two decades catch per unit effort (CPUE) and catch have remained relatively constant.

Essential Fish Habitat

Several investigations continued surveying shark nursery grounds and pupping areas along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts during 2001. Additionally, an investigation focused on Atlantic blue marlin spawning and nursery habitat utilization. Programs to track movements of adult and juvenile Atlantic bluefin tuna utilizing pop-up tags, archival tags, and ultrasonic depth-sensitive transmitters occurred during 2001.

Fishery Data Update

There are several sources of new information concerning HMS fisheries. These include mandatory permits for all charter and headboats fishing for HMS, as well as an HMS tournament database. In this document, data are analyzed by gear type to more easily assess the implications for each of our multi-species fisheries. Some of the more important developments from 2001 are:

- implementation of a charter/headboat permit;
- HMS tournament registration;
- transfer of 400 mt ww from the 2001 swordfish quota to Japan;
- closure of Northeast Distant Statistical (NED) Reporting Area;
- NED pelagic longline experimental fishery;
- shark emergency rule that restored shark quotas to the 1997 levels; and
- peer review of the large coastal shark (LCS) stock assessment.

Economic Status of HMS Fisheries

The 2002 SAFE report includes a section on the economic status of commercial and recreational HMS fisheries. In the previous SAFE report, this information was presented in association with various gear types, but this year's report combines 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 rules that had 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 by definition are highly migratory resources, 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 brief examination of the 2000 census. This section also provides a summary of expected community and social impacts of agency actions completed during 2001.

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. During 2000, a total of 11,361 metric tons of swordfish were imported into the United States. The use of trade data is an important tool in the monitoring and management of HMS and an effective supplement to existing information sources.

Bycatch

Bycatch of finfish and sea turtles and incidental catches of marine mammals and seabirds continue to be areas of concern in HMS management, with steps taken during 2001 in the pelagic longline fishery to protect sea turtles. These actions were taken in compliance with the HMS FMP and a Biological Opinion (BiOp) on HMS fisheries completed on June 14, 2001. A summary of agency actions taken during 2001 is also provided. A challenging aspect in dealing with bycatch is the international component of HMS fisheries, particularly considering that the United States often represents only a small percentage of the overall catch of these species on an Atlantic-wide basis.

HMS Permits

NMFS continues to explore effective and equitable means to reduce overcapitalization problems. As of October 2001, there were 642 total shark permit holders (directed, incidental), 420 total swordfish permit holders (directed, incidental, handgear), and 213 current tuna pelagic longline permit holders. However, those participating in the directed swordfish fishery must also possess an incidental shark permit and a tuna pelagic longline permit, so the cumulative number of permits does not necessarily 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.

NMFS has made significant improvements to its Atlantic tunas permitting system, including a website where constituents can purchase initial and renewal 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. NMFS hopes to build upon this success and consider automating other HMS permitting processes in the future.

Issues for Consideration and Outlook

In 2002, NMFS plans to continue implementing and evaluating the FMP measures in an attempt to address overfishing and overcapitalization problems that affect many HMS fisheries. It is anticipated that as a result of the HMS FMP, Amendment 1 of the Atlantic Billfish FMP, and the 2000 ICCAT recommendations that there will be a continued focus on implementing and/or enhancing monitoring of HMS recreational fisheries through charter/headboat permits and logbooks, observer programs, and landings of billfish and swordfish by recreational anglers, as well as monitoring and reporting of HMS tournaments. Further actions are expected related to the June 14, 2001, BiOp addressing loggerhead and leatherback sea turtle bycatch in Atlantic pelagic longline fisheries. The April 2002 HMS Advisory Panel meeting provides an excellent opportunity to identify and discuss those issues raised in the SAFE report which require further action. Through continuous public and constituent interaction, increased monitoring, ongoing life history work, and additional socio-economic assessment, NMFS strives to continue building sustainable fisheries for all Atlantic HMS.

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