

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This 2012 Stock Assessment and Fisheries Evaluation (SAFE) Report is produced by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Management Division. It contains a review of the current status of Atlantic HMS stocks (tunas, swordfish, billfish, and sharks) and describes the year's accomplishments in managing Atlantic HMS. Atlantic HMS SAFE Reports provide the public with information on the latest developments in Atlantic HMS management and fulfill Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) requirements.

Since the last HMS SAFE Report (December 2011), the HMS Management Division held two HMS Advisory Panel meetings and published several rules regarding HMS fisheries, including the requirements for vessel monitoring systems (VMS); the commercial Atlantic shark season quotas and opening/closing dates; the implementation of the electronic dealer reporting system; and the creation of the Commercial Caribbean Small Boat Permit in final Amendment 4 on Caribbean HMS fisheries. The HMS Management Division also consulted with the HMS Advisory Panel on several upcoming amendments to the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP including Amendment 5 on shark rebuilding, Amendment 7 on bluefin tuna management, and Amendment 8 on commercial swordfish fishing. In November 2012, the 18th Special Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) was held, during which the United States helped develop recommendations to promote the conservation, management, and rebuilding of Atlantic HMS stocks. At this meeting, ICCAT adopted recommendations regarding Western Atlantic and Eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean bluefin tunas; blue marlin, white marlin, and spearfish; sharks; and fishery monitoring, control, and surveillance measures.

Three stocks of HMS underwent international stock assessments in 2012: Atlantic bluefin tuna, Atlantic white marlin, and shortfin mako shark. A Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) assessment of Gulf of Mexico blacktip sharks was also completed (SEDAR 29, March 2012). While no modifications to essential fish habitat were made in 2012, NMFS continued shark nursery grounds research and essential fish habitat studies through two programs (COASTSPAN and GULFSPAN) along the U.S. Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean.

Much of the data in this report is based on final analyses of 2011 data that was completed and published in 2012, including reports from logbooks, dealers, and the NMFS Observer Programs. Overall landings (total, for all categories and areas) for the Atlantic HMS fisheries in 2011 indicated that bluefin tuna landings (883.7 mt) are comparable to those in 2007, yellowfin tuna landings (3,015.2 mt) are the highest since 2007, skipjack tuna landings (84.3 mt) are the highest since 2004 (with the exception of 119.4 mt in 2009), bigeye tuna landings (746.1 mt) are the highest since 2006, albacore tuna landings (449.0 mt) are the highest since 2007, and swordfish landings (2,887.6 mt) have remained fairly constant since 2004. Commercial landings (total, excluding fins) in 2011 of Atlantic large coastal sharks (684 mt dw) were less than the average of the annual totals since 2003 (1,143.9 mt dw), small coastal sharks (265 mt dw) were slightly higher than the average annual total since 2003 (263.8 mt dw), and pelagic sharks (143 mt dw) were less than the average annual total since 2003 (188.9 mt dw).

Atlantic tunas comprise the majority of the U.S. commercial handgear landings. The commercial handgear fishery accounted for approximately 66 percent of the total U.S. bluefin tuna landings in 2011. In the 2011 buoy gear fishery, less than 5 percent of the total swordfish catch was discarded dead, and 45 percent was released alive, according to the logbook data. Aside from swordfish, the most abundant buoy gear catches were king mackerel and dolphinfish, followed by oilfish and wahoo.

The recreational handgear fishery landings have remained steady for most species over the past several years, although an increase in blue marlin catch has been reported in 2012. Minimal roundscale spearfish catch has been reported since the species was added to the management unit in late 2010. The lowest number of recreational HMS tournaments registered with NMFS in 2011 since pre-2005.

Total observer coverage of the U.S. pelagic longline (PLL) fisheries reached 10.9 percent in 2011. The majority of observed interactions in the U.S. Atlantic PLL fishery with marine mammals were with pilot whales and Risso's dolphins. The number of interactions with sea turtles and sea birds is relatively low in the U.S. Atlantic PLL fishery when compared with other regions. The bottom longline (BLL) observer program selected 20 vessels in 2011 for mandatory observer coverage, completing a total of 139 BLL trips in the southern US. Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, targeting reef fish, sandbar sharks, or non-sandbar large coastal sharks. The gillnet observer program reported a total of 402 gillnet sets in 2011, including 4 strike and 398 sink, targeting sharks, Spanish mackerel, Atlantic croaker, or mixed teleosts. No drift gillnet vessels were observed in 2011.

The estimate of the total ex-vessel annual revenues of the Atlantic HMS Fisheries in 2011 was higher (\$52,357,858) than all of the years reported (since 2004). In particular, revenues from swordfish landings increased to \$20.2 million in 2011, a 24% increase since 2010. The average ex-vessel price for bluefin tuna has risen 21 percent since 2010. The primary expense associated with operating an Atlantic HMS permitted pelagic longline commercial vessel, fuel costs, increased over 170 percent from 2004 to 2011. In 2011, median reported total trip sales for pelagic longline vessels were \$26,650 and median net earnings per trip increased to \$11,255.

The community profiles of the HMS fisheries from the 2010 national census were presented in the 2011 SAFE Report. More complete data has since been published, and has been supplemented in this 2012 SAFE Report. The effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and recent hurricanes on these communities are also assessed.

Feedback and comments on this SAFE Report are encouraged and should be sent to the HMS Management Division, 1315 East West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, phone: (301) 427-8503, fax: (301) 713-1917.