



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

NMFS ANNOUNCES DECISION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH USING PELAGIC LONGLINE GEAR IN THE EAST FLORIDA COAST (EFC) AND CHARLESTON BUMP CLOSED AREAS

NMFS announces a final decision to issue Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP) to conduct research in portions of the East Florida Coast (EFC) and Charleston Bump closed areas (Figure 1) using a limited number of pelagic longline (PLL) vessels and the availability of a Final Environmental Assessment (EA). The pilot study does not modify existing PLL closed areas, reopen the closed areas to general PLL fishing activity, or propose changes to any other management measures.

Based on the results of the analysis and taking into consideration the full range of public comment received on the proposed pilot study, NMFS has decided to issue EFPs to conduct research by PLL vessels in the EFC and Charleston Bump PLL closed areas. Under the EFP Program, NMFS is authorizing three PLL vessels, only two of which will fish at any one time, to conduct an estimated 289 sets consisting of 500 hooks each, over a 12 month period. One-half of the sets will be made inside the closed areas and one-half of the sets will be made outside the closed areas. NMFS will compare data obtained from within the closed areas to data obtained from outside the closed areas, thereby allowing the Agency to determine the relative effectiveness of the PLL closed areas under current fishery conditions and provide data which can help determine if modifications to the areas may or may not be warranted.

To effectively manage Atlantic highly migratory species resources, NMFS requires data that will allow for appropriate evaluation of existing management measures. The existing PLL closed areas are one such management tool for which data are needed for a full evaluation under current fishery conditions. No PLL fishery data has been collected in the EFC and Charleston Bump closed areas since their implementation in 2001. All currently available data regarding catch rates and bycatch interactions from within the closed areas are pre-closure J-hook data. Significant changes have occurred in the fishery since 2001, including the rebuilding of the North Atlantic swordfish stock and implementation of bycatch reduction measures throughout the U.S. PLL fishery (e.g., circle hook requirements, bait requirements, bycatch release gear, and protected species handling and release workshops). The existing lack of baseline PLL fishery data from within the closed areas under current fishery conditions hinders NMFS' ability to evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of existing bycatch reduction measures and fully execute its management responsibilities.

In February 2007, NMFS received a related EFP application that sought exemptions for up to 13 PLL vessels to fish in the EFC and Charleston Bump closed areas to collect data on catch and bycatch. Via the Federal Register, NMFS requested public comment (72 FR 11327, March 13, 2007), and twice extended the public comment period (72 FR 18208, April 11, 2007; 72 FR 25748, May, 7, 2007) on that application. After considering the public comment received on the application, NMFS announced on August 9, 2007 (72 FR 44835) a decision not to authorize that activity based on deficiencies within the proposal and clearly stated in the Federal Register notice that the Agency was "...actively considering under what circumstances and how best to



conduct scientific research that is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of current bycatch reduction measures.”

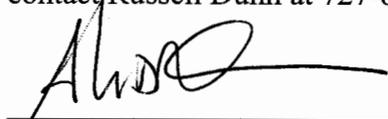
Taking into account public comment received on the February 2007 EFP PLL application and other considerations, NMFS, in conjunction with academic research partners, subsequently developed a pilot research program, including research methods and research areas, that is designed to collect data that will allow evaluation of current bycatch reduction measures under current fishery conditions. On November 5, 2007, NMFS published a notice in the Federal Register (72 FR 62441) announcing availability of, and requesting public comment on, a Draft EA for a data collection research program using two pelagic longline vessels in the EFC and Charleston Bump PLL closed areas. NMFS received comment on a number of issues including bycatch levels, impacts on target and non-target species, study methodology, and socio-economic impacts. Based on the public comment received, NMFS improved and expanded the environmental analyses. For example, the Agency included an additional set of catch and bycatch estimates based on circle hook data in the Final EA which were not included in the Draft EA.

NMFS actively sought to limit the anticipated adverse ecological and social impacts of this program in a number of ways while still collecting usable data in a scientifically sound manner. Based on historical data, NMFS selected a portion of the EFC PLL closed area for study that had lower bycatch than other portions of the EFC PLL closed area, and where interactions with recreational fishermen are anticipated to be less frequent. NMFS will require 18/0 non-offset circle hooks because this hook type has the greatest conservation benefit of the hooks tested thus far, including for sea turtles. NMFS chose not to include the use of J-hooks in the data collection, which limits comparability against historical data, because, at this time, the Agency can foresee no circumstances under which J-hooks would be allowed back into the PLL fishery. Thus, there was limited value to allowing higher mortality rates on bycatch species through the use of J-hooks in the study.

All vessels will be required to carry onboard personnel who are trained and certified in the release and disentanglement of protected species, as well as the release and disentanglement equipment stipulated in the Federal regulations. Further, all participating vessels will be required to carry NMFS certified observers at all times. As a result of these steps taken and stipulated by NMFS, the anticipated impacts, as detailed in Chapter 4 of the Final EA, are not considered to be significant.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Final Environmental Assessment is available on the HMS Management Division website at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms> or by calling 301-713-2347. For additional information, contact Russell Dunn at 727-824-5399 or Chris Rilling at 301-713-2347.



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Date

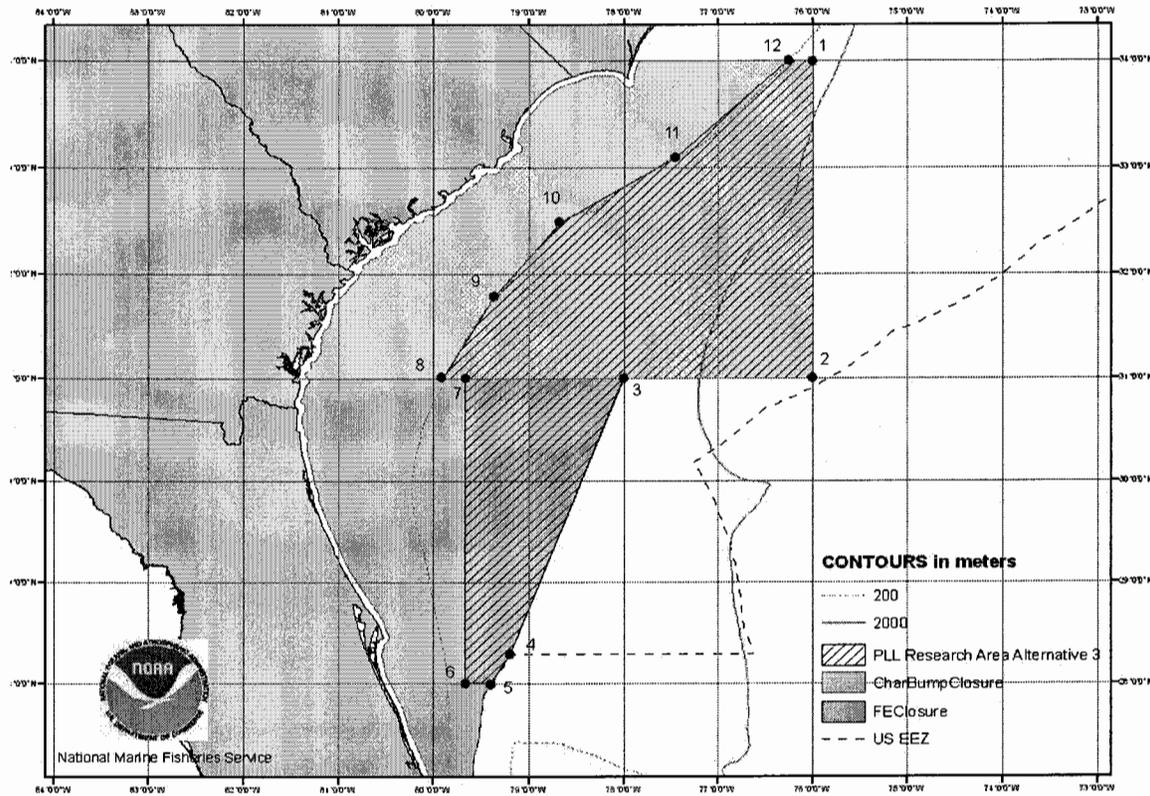


Figure 1. Area authorized to conduct research using pelagic longline vessels shown in hashed areas. Coordinates are provided in text beginning with point number 1 and proceeding clockwise to number 12.

Table 1. Latitude and longitude coordinates of the authorized research areas.

| 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' | 6.85" | -79° | 11' | 54.49" |
| 5 | 28° | 0' | 0" | -79° | 23' | 47.91" |
| 6 | 28° | 0' | 0" | -79° | 40' | 0" |
| 7 | 31° | 0' | 0" | -79° | 40' | 0" |
| 8 | 31° | 0' | 0" | -79° | 54' | 38.90" |
| 9 | 31° | 47' | 7.20" | -79° | 21' | 50.48" |
| 10 | 32° | 29' | 12.10" | -78° | 40' | 21.03" |
| 11 | 33° | 5' | 35.78" | -77° | 27' | 15.70" |
| 12 | 34° | 0' | 0" | -76° | 15' | 26.51" |