

September 24, 1999

Dear Pelagic Longline Fisherman:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has approved a vessel monitoring system (VMS) program for the Atlantic pelagic longline fishery in the Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Tunas, Swordfish, and Sharks (HMS FMP). The HMS VMS program will be used as an enforcement tool for management measures that protect HMS (e.g., time/area closures). VMS will allow NMFS to track pelagic longline fishing vessels by monitoring and recording regular geographic positions, and assist NMFS in determining whether any of these vessels is fishing in a closed area.

The HMS VMS program will also provide benefits to you. For example, all swordfish will no longer have to be offloaded by the date of a directed fishery closure. As long as you do not fish after the closure, you may steam in and offload your catch at a later date.

Participation in the VMS program is required as of January 1, 2000, for all vessels fishing with pelagic longline gear on board. **Do not purchase a VMS unit unless you have received confirmation from NMFS that you qualify for a limited access permit.**

NMFS has approved two satellite systems for the HMS VMS program: Argos and Inmarsat-C. NMFS has entered into a 3-year service agreement with ArgoNet/NACLS, which allows the Argos system to be used in the HMS VMS program. The 3-year term begins on the effective date of the HMS VMS Program (January 1, 2000). At the end of the 3-year term, approval of Argos will be subject to reconsideration at which time it may be renewed for another 3-year period. NMFS strongly recommends each pelagic longline fisherman compare the approved systems (Argos and Inmarsat-C), units (ArgoNet/NACLS, Trimble, Thrane & Thrane), and communications providers (NACLS, Station 12, COMSAT) to determine which ones best suit the fisherman's particular needs.

The following enclosed documents should help you to understand the VMS program:

- Those sections of the final regulations implementing the HMS VMS program (64 FR 29090; 05/28/99) that relate to the VMS program;
- A flier announcing a delay in the effective date of the HMS VMS program;
- The Federal Register notice of NMFS' approved VMS units and communication service providers (64 FR 48988; 09/09/99);
- A brochure describing the HMS VMS program; and
- A Question and Answer Guide about and contact list for the HMS VMS program.

A copy of the Installation and Activation Checklist for the HMS VMS program will be mailed to you shortly by the NMFS Office of Law Enforcement.

Do not delay. You may not fish with a pelagic longline on board after January 1, 2000 unless NMFS is receiving your VMS reports.

If you have any questions regarding the HMS VMS program regulations, please call Jill Stevenson, NMFS, at (301) 713-2347 or Buck Sutter at (727) 570-5447.

Sincerely,

Gary Matlock, Director
Office of Sustainable Fisheries