



ABTA

"PROTECTING YOUR FISHERY"

THE AMERICAN BLUEFIN TUNA ASSOCIATION
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On March 14th, NMFS published a proposed rule outlining the Specifications for the 2011 Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery that will lead to its lowest-ever quotas for all categories throughout the fleet except the pelagic longline fleet (PLL).

For a few years now the PLL fleet has been responsible for large levels of dead discards of bluefin tuna. Due to the fact that extra, unused quota was available to cover this overage in prior years, NMFS has been able to avoid dealing with the issue. But with cuts taken in the fishery (due to NOAA efforts) at the 2010 ICCAT meeting this past November, and the reduction of allowable underage rollover as a result of a 2009 ICCAT decision now going into effect, the agency could no longer sweep this problem under the rug.

While one would naturally have expected the agency to have instituted solutions to a problem that they have known about for many years, NMFS has instead decided to sacrifice the traditional directed bluefin fleet. In a move that has infuriated the bluefin industry, NMFS has proposed to use the number of 160 tons as a proxy for the PLL dead discards and deduct it off the top of the overall US allocation. By acknowledging the PLL discards and by taking them off the top of the total US quota, they are in actuality permanently allocating this tonnage to the PLL and taking it from all the other historical users.

This proposed reduction represents a massive shift in the traditional allocations amongst the varied bluefin user groups. The 160 mt of discards, combined with the 69 mt the PLL fleet is allowed to land, would balloon the PLL percentage of bluefin quota from 8.1% to roughly 28%! To put this into perspective, the changes would reduce the allocation of the general category- by far the largest traditional category- to only 39% from the 47% required by law flowing from the 1999 Atlantic Tunas FMP. This shift in allocation will result in reduced bag limits, shorter regional fishing seasons, early closures, and tremendous financial losses for the recreational and commercial hand gear fisheries.

This reduction in quota for the directed fleet will lead to serious economic harm to the thousands of commercial and recreational fishermen from Maine to Florida that make-up the traditional bluefin fleet. Moreover, since the agency has proposed no new rules to reduce bycatch in the PLL fleet, even higher overages could occur in 2011 and beyond, with the agency continuing to simply deduct the number off the overall quota. There is no cap on the potential level of PLL discards. The directed fishery is actually threatened by the discards from incidental fisheries.

The agency has known of the high levels of discards in the PLL fleet for multiple years and has chosen to ignore the problem. Absolutely nothing has been done to reduce discards in the majority of areas that the fleet interacts with bluefin. Instead of taking steps to address the problem they have simply decided to take steps to drastically impact the rest of the fishery.

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Adding insult to injury, initially the agency was going to hold only one public hearing in all of New England, an area that makes up a large part of the overall fishery. Moreover, this one meeting was going to be held on short notice- only one week after the Federal Register notice. Why so fast? Most fishermen don't even know the proposed rule is out! This proposed rule represents a dramatic shift in allocations and the public deserves the proper opportunity to speak up and tell the agency how they feel.

Luckily, ABTA was able to work with the states and Congress to ensure that fishermen would have a real opportunity to be heard. This led to a 15-day extension of the comment period, the movement of the Gloucester hearing until April 1st, and the addition of two more meetings- one in Fairhaven, MA, and one in Portland, ME.

ABTA urges all bluefin fishermen to either attend a public hearing or comment on the rule (or both) to show their displeasure with the path the agency is taking. This will be your only chance to help ensure that this unfair change of course is not allowed to occur for this coming fishing season starting June 1. The first meeting in New England was held at the NMFS building in Gloucester, MA on April 1st from 1:00 to 3:00 pm. Despite being held at a difficult time of day, and during a snowstorm, 200 fishermen and others attended.

But it is critical for everyone to attend one of the last two meetings. The next meeting is in Portland, ME, at the Holiday Inn By The Bay, on April 25th, from 6 to 9 pm. The last meeting in the region will be the following day, April 26th, at the Seaport Inn in Fairhaven, MA, from 6- 9 pm.

Go to the ABTA web site for news and updates on potential additional meetings. ABTA web site: www.theabta.com

To read the proposed rule, you can also go to the link below. The information on the currently scheduled meetings and options on how to make comments can be found on the first page of the document.

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/newslist/2011/03-11-11_BFT_Proposed_Specs_Listserve.pdf

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