



February 27, 2020

Mr. Randy Blankinship
HMS Management Division
Office of Sustainable Fisheries, F/SF1
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

RE: NOAA-NMFS-2018-0035; Final Environmental Impact Statement regarding Atlantic bluefin tuna area-based and weak hook management measures

The American Bluefin Tuna Association, American Sportfishing Association, International Game Fish Association, and The Pew Charitable Trusts appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments on the Final Regulatory Amendment to Modify Pelagic Longline Bluefin Tuna Area-Based and Weak Hook Management Measures (NOAA-NMFS-2018-0035), including the accompanying final environmental impact statement (FEIS). Together we represent commercial bluefin tuna fishermen, charter and private recreational anglers, and other committed stewards of U.S. fisheries who invested extensive time and resources working in collaboration with NOAA Fisheries to carefully craft Amendment 7. With this new rulemaking to reopen the Gulf of Mexico Gear Restricted Areas (GRAs) to pelagic longline fishing NOAA Fisheries has abandoned proven, science-based policy, ignored the conclusions of their own analysis, and discounted overwhelming public opposition to a losing proposition for both western Atlantic bluefin tuna and U.S. commercial fishermen.

Starting in 2015, NOAA closed two areas totaling 26,858 square miles in the Gulf of Mexico during April and May to pelagic longline fishing. Following more than six years of scientific analysis and stakeholder consultation, the closures were designed to balance fishing opportunities with protections for depleted western Atlantic bluefin tuna at the peak of their spawn in their primary spawning area. Since implemented in 2015, the Gulf GRAs have worked exceedingly well to address the decades-problem of high mortality and dead discards of spawning bluefin. During the first three years of the closures, bluefin mortality decreased 88% in April and 81% in May, when compared to the three years prior to the closures. Dead discards totaled just 3.6 mt in 2018, down from 69 mt in 2012, a 95% reduction. Furthermore, this conservation actually resulted in a 38% increase in target catch of yellowfin tuna for the Gulf pelagic longline fishery (NOAA 2014, Table 4.12; NOAA 2018, Table 16).

By reopening the Gulf GRAs to pelagic longline fishing, Preferred Alternative C3 would jeopardize this success. The preferred alternative establishes an annual maximum cap of 63,150 lbs, which is more than double the landings in the entire Gulf for 2015-17 combined. With such an exorbitant threshold it is highly unlikely that the three year “review process” will ever trigger any actual “review.” At best, this is a loss for severely depleted bluefin tuna and at worst, an invitation for other countries to increase fishing pressure on bluefin where and when they are most vulnerable.

After reviewing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement extensively and finding no scientific basis for reopening the Gulf GRAs, we met twice with the Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries, hoping to get clarity on the agency’s reasoning. However, neither the Assistant Administrator, nor other senior agency leadership present at those meetings, were able to provide such justification. According to the FEIS, this action is an effort to further the “Department of Commerce strategic plan objectives to review agency regulations and remove or modify rules that unnecessarily burden businesses and economic growth.” However, in terms of the Gulf GRA action, data indicate the opposite result is more likely.

The FEIS estimates that reopening the Gulf GRAs could cause up to a 1 percent increase or up to a 21 percent decrease in fishing revenues in April and May for the same fishermen this rulemaking claims to benefit. Absent from the rulemaking is an analysis of the long-term impacts this action could have on directed commercial and recreational bluefin fisheries outside the Gulf of Mexico. In other words, this rulemaking is more likely to hinder than support the economic growth of the pelagic longline fishery, as well as introduce additional economic uncertainty for those directed bluefin fishermen who rely on these fish the most.

Preferred Alternative C3 also ignores overwhelming public comment. In reopening the Gulf, the agency action is counter to the recommendations of over 60 organizations and businesses and approximately 16,000 public comments submitted during the Fall 2019 public comment period. Looking further back to the passage of Amendment 7, NOAA’s decision also makes no reference to the more than 250 organizations and businesses and approximately 300,000 individuals who supported the original creation of the Gulf gear restricted areas in 2015.

We urge you once again to maintain the existing April through May prohibition on pelagic longline fishing in the two Gulf of Mexico Gear Restricted Areas.

Sincerely,

David Schalit
President
American Bluefin Tuna Association

Jason Schratwieser
President
International Game Fish Association

Kellie Ralston
Southeast Fisheries Policy Director
American Sportfishing Association

Tom Wheatley
Manager, U.S. Oceans, Gulf of Mexico
The Pew Charitable Trusts

References

NOAA. 2014. Final Amendment 7 to the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan. http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/documents/fmp/am7/final_amendment_7_to_the_2006_consolidated_atlantic_highly_migratory_species_fishery_management_plan_8_28_2014_for_web.pdf

NOAA. 2018. Scoping Document: Issues and Options for Pelagic Longline Bluefin Tuna Area-Based and Weak Hook Management. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/webdam/download/67308403>