



TBF's Guide to Draft Amendment 7

In August of 2013, NMFS released Draft Amendment 7 for bluefin tuna management. The objectives of Amendment 7 are to take actions that will rebuild the stock, end overfishing, and meet conservation and management objectives set forth in the 2006 HMS Fishery Management Plan as well as international recommendations established by International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT). In doing so, the new fishery management plan will optimize fishing opportunity, enhance reporting and account for and reduce bluefin tuna dead discards. Dead discards are an important aspect because they are now accounted for as part of the allocated quota and a reduction in dead discards is beneficial for the fishery.

The Draft Amendment 7 focuses primarily on quota re-allocation of bluefin tuna amongst categories, but also proposes alternatives to open current pelagic longline closed areas to longline fishing again as well as establishing new longline closures to minimize bluefin tuna interaction and discards. TBF has summarized the main proposed alternatives in Amendment 7 and provided initial comments for each below. Please visit www.billfish.org/advocacy for full details on Amendment 7.

Limited and Conditional Access to Longlines in Closed Areas

Alternative B 3 proposes to allow a small number of vessels to fish in the current pelagic longline closed zones including the Florida East Coast, the Desoto Canyons, the Charleston Bump, and the North East Closures. Established in 2000 to reduce the bycatch and discards of juvenile swordfish, billfish, and other marine life, NMFS states that the non-research commercial data from inside these areas will “*be used to evaluate the effectiveness and/or impacts of closed areas as well as stock assessments or other management measures*” and will “*provide additional fishing opportunities...and mitigate the potential negative impacts of other draft Amendment 7 alternatives that may be implemented.*” NMFS estimates longline vessels will take 80 trips into the DeSoto Canyons and 20 trips into the Florida East Coast (FEC) closed zones annually.

Reduction of Billfish and Swordfish Discards After Establishment of Closed Zones in 2000 ¹				
Years Following Closed Zone (2000)	Blue Marlin Discards	White Marlin Discards	Sailfish Discards	Swordfish Discards
2001-2003	-58.7%	-47.0%	-74.6%	-38.5%
2005-2011	-61.6%	-59.8%	-66.9%	-56.7%

TBF strongly opposes allowing limited and conditional access for longline vessels in the current longline closed zones. These areas were established to reduce the bycatch and discards of juvenile swordfish, billfish and other marine life. The benefits of these longline closed zones have been instrumental for the recreational fishing community with great numbers of billfish and swordfish caught in recent years. If NMFS allows fishing in these areas, it could not only have large ecological impacts but also tremendous socio-economic impacts on the sportfishing community.

Angling Category Trophy Sub-Quota for Gulf of Mexico

Alternative E 3 proposes allocating a portion of the Trophy South Sub-Quota to the Gulf of Mexico. Currently the sub-quota for trophy-sized bluefin tuna (greater than 73" curved fork length) is split between the north and the south, each receiving 1.4 metric tons (mt) and 2.8 mt, respectively. While it is illegal for anglers to target bluefin tuna in the Gulf of Mexico, recreational anglers in the Gulf of Mexico do encounter bluefin from time to time and in recent years encounters have occurred after the Southern Trophy quota was closed. Providing anglers in the Gulf of Mexico with a separate quota will reduce dead discards of bluefin tuna caught unintentionally while fishing for other target species.

TBF supports this alternative, but believes that the equal allocation of between the three regions may take opportunities away from the Mid-Atlantic region and subsequently suggests the following quotas: 33% (1.4 mt) for the North, 50% (2.1 mt) for the South, and 17% (0.7 mt) for the Gulf of Mexico. This will provide opportunities for Gulf of Mexico anglers without creating negative impacts on anglers fishing in the other portions of the Southern region.

¹ 2012 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report, NOAA

New Pelagic Longline Gear Restricted Areas

Alternative B 1 for Area Based Alternatives proposes several longline Gear Restricted Areas (GRA) with the goal of reducing interactions and discards of bluefin tuna. One of the two preferred alternatives is the establishment of a ‘Small Gulf of Mexico Restricted Area’ that would restrict the use of pelagic longlines for the months of April and May (Alternative B 1f). The proposed “Access Based on Performance” for a new Cape Hatteras Pelagic Longline Gear Restricted Area is also a preferred alternative that would significantly reduce the interactions with and discards of bluefin tuna. Vessels determined to have demonstrated low rates of interactions with bluefin tuna and compliance with vessel reporting and monitoring requirements would be permitted to fish the months of December through April in the GRA.

Other alternatives include Alternative B 1e which would prohibit longline fishing in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM) within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for three months (March-May) and Alternative B 1g would restrict pelagic longline gear in the GOM year-round. Longline vessels would be authorized to still fish for yellowfin tuna and swordfish, but required to use alternative gears.

TBF believes for a pelagic longline closure to be effective in the Gulf of Mexico, it must encompass the entire EEZ west of 82°W. The preferred alternative, the ‘Small Gulf of Mexico Closed Area’, does not generate enough benefits for bluefin tuna. The significant benefits for bluefin tuna primarily stem from The Cape Hatteras Closed Area with Performance Based Access. Fishery-wide, this area is estimated to reduce the number of bluefin kept by 3% and the number of bluefin discarded by 29%.

Of the proposed alternatives, TBF supports the 3-month Gulf of Mexico Closure (Alt. B 1e). However, TBF suggests the establishment of a 4-month Gulf of Mexico GRA (March-June). The benefits for billfish from a 4-month closure would nearly double compared to the 3-month closure. While TBF understands that a 6-month or 12-month longline closure in the Gulf of Mexico would be the most beneficial for bluefin tuna, billfish, swordfish, and other marine life, NMFS must balance conservation goals with realities of domestic fisheries management and the need to harvest target species for the country to stay prominent in international fisheries negotiations.

Summary Impacts of Gear Restricted Area (GRA) Alternatives²

Alternative		Blue Marlin	White Marlin	Sailfish	Bluefin Tuna Kept	Bluefin Tuna Discarded	Swordfish Kept	Swordfish Discarded	Yellowfin Kept	Yellowfin Discarded
B 1c	Cape Hatteras GRA (Dec-April)	0%	0%	0%	-3%	-29%	-2%	-1%	-1%	-1%
B 1e	GOM EEZ GRA (March-May)	-8%	-4%	-10%	-12%	-10%	-5%	-12%	-6%	-10%
B 1f	Small GOM GRA (March-April)	0%	0%	-1%	-3%	-3%	-1%	-4%	-1%	-1%
B 1g	GOM EEZ GRA (Year Round)	-38%	-32%	-50%	-21%	-12%	-15%	-31%	-39%	-39%
<i>TBF Proposed 4-Month GRA</i>	<i>GOM EEZ GRA (March-June)</i>	<i>-15%</i>	<i>-10%</i>	<i>-18%</i>	<i>-13%</i>	<i>-11%</i>	<i>-6%</i>	<i>-14%</i>	<i>-10%</i>	<i>-22%</i>

Individual Bluefin Quotas (IBQs) for Longline Vessels

The objectives of Alternative C 2 for ‘Individual Bluefin Tuna Quota’ (IBQ) are to limit the amount of bluefin landings and discards in the pelagic longline fishery, provide incentives for vessels to avoid bluefin tuna, and to balance the objective of reducing bluefin discards while optimizing fishing opportunities. The proposed alternatives within the complex proposed IBQ system have several possibilities that address the vessels eligible to receive bluefin quota shares, the means by which quotas will be allocated, vessel requirements for an IBQ, the details associated with IBQ trading, and how the program will be evaluated in the future.

If an IBQ system is implemented for pelagic longline vessels to benefit bluefun tuna, a bycatch cap should also be established to benefit other species including billfish. A vessel would be required to switch to approved alternative gear (buoy gear, greenstick, rod and reel) to continue fishing for yellowfin and swordfish once the IBQ is reached. If a similar Billfish Bycatch Cap is established, vessels would be required to switch to approved alternative gear once reaching the cap. This would reduce billfish bycatch and decrease the post-release mortality of billfish hooked on alternative gears as compared to those caught by longline gear.

² Fishery-wide impacts evaluated