

February 11, 2011

Margo Schulze-Haugen
Highly Migratory Species Management Division
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

RE: RIN 0648–BA39, Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Bluefin Tuna Bycatch Reduction in the Gulf of Mexico Pelagic Longline Fishery

Dear Ms. Schulze-Haugen:

We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments regarding Proposed Rule RIN 0648-BA39. We thank the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for soliciting comments on the proposed rule that will require the use of weak hooks to reduce bluefin bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico. Although the research on weak hook technology does indicate that the hooks can reduce the number of bluefin tuna brought to the boat at haul back, the research does not indicate how effective the hooks will be in reducing the mortality of bluefin and other large pelagic bycatch species such as marlin. Thus, we do not believe the proposed rule is an adequate solution. NMFS must pursue closing the Gulf of Mexico to surface longlines as a means to protect imperiled bluefin and marlin stocks. We discuss our concerns in more detail below.

Based on the results of the NMFS weak hook research, this new gear could reduce bluefin tuna bycatch, at haul back, by 56.5% for an estimated annual reduction of 124 fish. However, the research does not consider the condition of bluefin after release from the straightened weak hook. The Gulf of Mexico is the only known spawning ground for Western Atlantic bluefin and large reproductive individuals are at risk to surface longlines. Because of their endothermic physiology, the warm surface waters of the Gulf of Mexico expose bluefin to thermal stress. Bluefin naturally counteract this problem by diving to cooler water temperatures. Fish caught on weak hooks may free themselves, but still die because of lactic acid build up and reduced cardiac output from thermal stress. These physiological stresses can also make bluefin more prone to predation. In addition, dead bluefin might straighten weak hooks during haul back because of increased drag. Because NMFS's research justifying this proposed rule does not prove a significant reduction in bluefin bycatch mortality, requiring the use of weak hooks on surface longlines is not an adequate solution to deal with the problem.

From 2007-2009, surface longline fishing gear wasted 5,154 swordfish, marlin and sailfish in the Gulf of Mexico. The majority of which (4,361) were undersized, sexually immature swordfish. The weak hook research indicates that surface longline fishermen could experience a reduction in legal size swordfish because these large, valuable swordfish will straighten the weak hook. In order to make up for the lost revenue from losing the large swordfish, longline fishermen will likely increase fishing effort, thus catching and killing even more undersized swordfish and other bycatch species. A reduction in the catch of target swordfish could also make it less likely that longline fishermen will comply with the weak hook requirement. Moreover, given the fact that these hooks are nearly identical to the current hooks, enforcement will be extremely difficult.

According to the NMFS Pelagic Observer Program, in addition to swordfish, surface longlines caught and killed a minimum of 196 blue marlin, 255 sailfish and 121 white marlin during the same period. An

additional 84 white marlin or roundscale spearfish were also killed, but observers were unable to distinguish the two species. Because NMFS does not allow fishermen to retain these fish for sale, those dead fish were thrown back into the Gulf of Mexico, thus wasting even more valuable and important recreational fish species.

The status of white marlin stocks is a matter for considerable concern. For years, this species has teetered on the brink of an Endangered Species Act listing. Surface longline fishing gear is responsible for almost 70% of the fishing mortality for this species. Yet, the weak hook research indicates a marginally significant increase in white marlin catch rates of up to 52.7%.

As recreational anglers, we appreciate the willingness of NMFS to reduce bluefin bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico. However, we do not believe that the proposed rule alone will solve the bycatch problem or the bycatch problems with other valuable and important recreational fish species in the Gulf of Mexico. To ensure effective long-term conservation measures for spawning bluefin tuna and important recreational species such as billfish, NMFS must move forward with additional, immediate and meaningful conservation measures, such as prohibiting surface longline fishing gear in the Gulf of Mexico. This action will solve the bycatch problems and facilitate the transition to more selective fishing gear. Thank you for your time and consideration.