



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NMFS Announces a Final Rule to Temporarily Suspend Circle Hook Requirements for Anglers Participating in Atlantic Billfish Tournaments

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will suspend existing regulations that require Atlantic billfish tournament participants who are fishing from HMS permitted vessels and deploying natural bait or natural bait/artificial lure combinations to use non-offset circle hooks effective May 11, 2007 through December 31, 2007. Under this final action, non-offset circle hook requirements for Atlantic billfish participants will be reinstated unchanged at 12:01 a.m. January 1, 2008.

The circle hook requirement for HMS permitted vessels fishing in Atlantic billfish tournaments was implemented January 1, 2007 by the Final Consolidated Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (Consolidated HMS FMP) (October 2, 2006; 71 FR 58058). Since that time, NMFS has continued to receive public comment on the perceived impacts of the billfish tournament circle hook requirement contained in the Consolidated HMS FMP.

In response to continuing public input that, among other things, expressed a desire for delay in implementation of the circle hook requirement, NMFS published a proposed rule on March 15, 2007 (72 FR 12154), that included a preferred alternative to suspend Atlantic billfish tournament circle hook requirements through December 31, 2007. The public comment period closed on March 30, 2007. Three public hearings were held in the vicinities of Ocean City, MD; Morehead City, NC; and Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The primary comments received on the proposed rule included, but were not limited to, support for, and opposition to, modifying regulations to allow the use of J-hooks with natural bait/artificial lure combinations (combination baits) in Atlantic billfish tournaments; support for, and opposition to, a proposed temporary suspension of Atlantic billfish tournament circle hook requirements; support for eliminating Atlantic billfish tournament circle hook requirements; better defining circle hooks; and, support for and expressed interest in funding further research on post-release hooking mortality of Atlantic billfish when J-hooks are tolled at high speeds with combination baits.

This final action is intended to increase post-release survival of Atlantic billfishes by improving long-term compliance with recreational billfish tournament circle hook regulations. To accomplish this, this final action will provide additional time for recreational billfish tournament anglers to become more proficient with circle hooks and increase awareness among tournament anglers of circle hook conservation benefits.

This notice is a courtesy to the HMS fishery participants to help keep you informed about your fishery. Official notice of Federal fishing actions is made through filing such notice with the Office of Federal Register. For further information on this final rule and its requirements, contact Russell Dunn or Randy Blankinship at (727) 824-5399. Copies of the final rule and final Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review/Final Regulatory Flexibility Analysis are



available upon request from the Highly Migratory Species Management Division, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910 (phone: 301-713-2347, fax: 301-713-1917). The information will also be posted on the HMS website at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/>.

for James P. Boyer

Alan D. Risenhoover
Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries

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Date