



Atlantic Bluefin Tuna General Category Fishery: NMFS Transfers 24.3 mt from December 2016 Subquota to January 2016 Subquota; Daily Retention Limit for January 2016 Subquota Period is Three Fish

December 11, 2015

Action being taken and important dates

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) transfers 24.3 metric tons (mt) of Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) quota from the General category (commercial handgear) December 2016 subquota period to the January 2016 subquota period, and adjusts the Atlantic tunas General category BFT daily retention limit from the default of one to **three** large medium or giant BFT (measuring 73" or greater) per vessel per day/trip for the January 2016 subquota period. Although called the "January" subquota, the General category fishery under this quota may continue until the subquota is reached or March 31, whichever comes first. Hence, the retention limit adjustment is *effective January 1 through March 31, 2016*, or until the January subquota is reached, *whichever comes first*.

Quota Transfer: The transfer of 24.3 mt of General category quota allocated for the December 2016 period to the January 2016 period results in a subquota of 49 mt for the January 2016 period and a December 2016 period subquota of 0 mt. NMFS will close the General category January fishery when the adjusted January period subquota of 49 mt has been reached, or it will close automatically on March 31, 2016, whichever comes first, and it will remain closed until the General category fishery reopens on June 1, 2016.

NMFS also anticipates that some underharvest of the 2015 adjusted U.S. BFT quota will be carried forward to 2016 to the Reserve category, in accordance with the regulations implementing Amendment 7 to the 2006 Consolidated Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Fishery Management Plan (FMP). This, in addition to the fact that any unused General category quota will roll forward to the next subperiod within the calendar year, makes it possible that General category quota will remain available through the end of 2016 for December fishery participants, even with the transfer. Therefore, General category participants in all areas and time periods should have opportunities to harvest the General category quota.

Daily Retention Limit for the January 2016 Subquota Period: Based on recent fishery performance and the quota transfer, among other things, NMFS anticipates that the default one-fish limit likely would be overly restrictive and would not provide opportunities to harvest the full January subquota without exceeding it. Although NMFS may set the daily retention limit to up to five fish, the January subquota could be caught quickly under a higher limit (and higher fish availability), resulting in a short fishing season which may preclude or reduce fishing opportunities due to the migratory nature and seasonal distribution of BFT. NMFS has determined that a three-fish limit is warranted.

NMFS takes this action after considering the regulatory determination criteria regarding inseason adjustments, which include considerations about the amount of available quota, effects of the action on the continuation of the fishery, availability of BFT on the fishing grounds, the value of information obtained from the fishery, and the effects of the adjustment on the stock and on accomplishing the objectives of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments. This action should provide opportunities to harvest the available U.S. BFT quota without exceeding it; preserve the opportunity for General category fishermen to participate in the winter BFT fishery; and collect a broad range of data for stock monitoring purposes.

Through December 31, 2015, or until the available General category quota is reached, whichever comes first, the current General category retention limit of three large medium or giant BFT per vessel per day/trip (as announced November 25, 2015) remains in effect. For more information on BFT fishing regulations, including recreational size and retention limits, please go to hmspermits.noaa.gov.

Who is affected?

This action applies to vessels permitted in the **commercial** Atlantic tunas General category and the HMS Charter/Headboat category while fishing commercially. The daily retention limit is effective for all areas except for the Gulf of Mexico, which is designated as BFT spawning grounds and where NMFS does not allow targeted fishing for BFT. Regardless of the duration of a fishing trip, the daily retention limit applies upon landing. For example, during the January 2016 subquota period, whether a vessel fishing under the General category limit takes a two-day trip or makes two trips in one day, the day/trip limit of *three* fish applies and may not be exceeded upon landing.

NMFS will continue to monitor the BFT fisheries closely. Dealers are required to submit landing reports within 24 hours of a dealer receiving BFT. **General category, HMS Charter/Headboat, Harpoon, and Angling category vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead, within 24 hours of the landing(s) or end of each trip, by accessing hmspermits.noaa.gov.** Depending on fishing effort and catch rates, additional retention limit adjustments or fishery closures may be necessary to ensure available quota is not exceeded or to enhance scientific data collection from, and fishing opportunities in, all geographic areas.

NMFS regulations at 50 CFR 635.21(a)(1) require that all BFT that are released be handled in a manner that will maximize survivability, and without removing the fish from the water. For additional information on safe handling, see the Careful Catch and Release brochure available at www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/.

This notice is a courtesy to BFT fishery permit holders to help keep you informed about the fishery. For additional information, call (978) 281-9260, or go to hmspermits.noaa.gov. Official notice of Federal fishery actions is made through filing such notice with the Office of the Federal Register.

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