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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 635

[Docket No. 120627194-3657-02]

RTID 0648-XA222

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; North Atlantic Swordfish Fishery

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule.

SUMMARY: NMFS is adjusting the Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limits for the Northwest Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and U.S. Caribbean regions for July through December of the 2020 fishing year, unless further action is taken. The Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limits in each of these regions are increased from the regulatory default limits (either two or three fish) to six swordfish per vessel per trip. The Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limit in the Florida Swordfish Management Area will remain unchanged at the default limit of zero swordfish per vessel per trip, as discussed in more detail below. These adjustments apply to Swordfish General Commercial permitted vessels and to Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Charter/Headboat permitted vessels with a commercial endorsement when on a non-for-hire trip. This action is based upon consideration of the applicable inseason regional retention limit adjustment criteria.

DATES: The adjusted Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limits in the Northwest Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and U.S. Caribbean regions are effective from July 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Rick Pearson, e-mail: *rick.a.pearson@noaa.gov* or phone 727-824-5399.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Regulations implemented under the authority of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act (ATCA; 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.*) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*) governing the harvest of North Atlantic swordfish by persons and vessels subject to U.S. jurisdiction are found at 50 CFR part 635. Section 635.27 subdivides the U.S. North Atlantic swordfish quota recommended by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and implemented by the United States into two equal semi-annual directed fishery quotas; an annual incidental catch quota for fishermen targeting other species or catching swordfish recreationally, and a reserve category, according to the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP) (71 FR 58058, October 2, 2006), as amended, and in accordance with implementing regulations. NMFS is required under ATCA and the Magnuson-Stevens Act to provide U.S. fishing vessels with a reasonable opportunity to harvest the ICCAT-recommended quota.

In 2017, ICCAT Recommendation 17-02 specified that the overall North Atlantic swordfish total allowable catch (TAC) be set at 9,925 metric tons (mt) dressed weight

(dw) (13,200 mt whole weight (ww)) through 2021. Consistent with scientific advice, this was a reduction of 500 mt ww (375.9 mt dw) from previous ICCAT-recommended TACs. However, the United States' baseline quota remained at 2,937.6 mt dw (3,907 mt ww) per year. The Recommendation (17-02) also continued to limit underharvest carryover to 15 percent of a contracting party's baseline quota. Thus, the United States may carry over a maximum of 440.6 mt dw (586.0 mt ww) of underharvest. Absent adjustments, the codified baseline quota is 2,937.6 mt dw for 2020. At this time, given the extent of expected underharvest in 2019, NMFS anticipates carrying over the maximum allowable 15 percent (440.6 mt dw), which would result in a final adjusted North Atlantic swordfish quota for the 2020 fishing year equal to 3,378.2 mt dw (2,937.6 + 440.6 = 3,378.2 mt dw). As in past years we anticipate allocating 50 mt dw from the adjusted quota to the Reserve category for inseason adjustments/research and allocating 300 mt dw to the Incidental category, which includes recreational landings and landings by incidental swordfish permit holders, consistent with § 635.27(c)(1)(i)(D) and (B). This would result in an adjusted quota of 3,028.2 mt dw for the directed fishery, which would be split equally (1,514.1 mt dw) between the two semi-annual periods in 2020 (January through June, and July through December).

Adjustment of Swordfish General Commercial Permit Vessel Retention Limits

The 2020 North Atlantic swordfish fishing year, which is managed on a calendar-year basis and divided into two equal semi-annual quotas for the directed fishery, began on January 1, 2020. Landings attributable to the Swordfish General Commercial permit count against the applicable semi-annual directed fishery quota. Regional default

retention limits for this permit have been established and are automatically effective from January 1 through December 31 each year, unless changed based on the inseason regional retention limit adjustment criteria at § 635.24(b)(4)(iv). The default retention limits established for the Swordfish General Commercial permit are: 1) Northwest Atlantic region – three swordfish per vessel per trip; 2) Gulf of Mexico region – three swordfish per vessel per trip; 3) U.S. Caribbean region – two swordfish per vessel per trip; and, 4) Florida Swordfish Management Area – zero swordfish per vessel per trip. The default retention limits apply to Swordfish General Commercial permitted vessels and to HMS Charter/Headboat permitted vessels with a commercial endorsement when fishing on non-for-hire trips. As a condition of these permits, vessels may not possess, retain, or land any more swordfish than is specified for the region in which the vessel is located.

Under § 635.24(b)(4)(iii), NMFS may increase or decrease the Swordfish General Commercial permit vessel retention limit in any region within a range from zero to a maximum of six swordfish per vessel per trip. Any adjustments to the retention limits must be based upon a consideration of the relevant criteria provided in § 635.24(b)(4)(iv), which include: A) the usefulness of information obtained from biological sampling and monitoring of the North Atlantic swordfish stock; B) the estimated ability of vessels participating in the fishery to land the amount of swordfish quota available before the end of the fishing year; C) the estimated amounts by which quotas for other categories of the fishery might be exceeded; D) effects of the adjustment on accomplishing the objectives of the fishery management plan and its amendments; E) variations in seasonal distribution, abundance, or migration patterns of swordfish; F) effects of catch rates in

one region precluding vessels in another region from having a reasonable opportunity to harvest a portion of the overall swordfish quota; and, G) review of dealer reports, landing trends, and the availability of swordfish on the fishing grounds.

NMFS has considered these criteria as discussed below and their applicability to the Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limit in all regions for July through December of the 2020 North Atlantic swordfish fishing year. NMFS has determined that the Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limits in the Northwest Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and U.S. Caribbean regions applicable to persons issued a Swordfish General Commercial permit or HMS Charter/Headboat permit with a commercial endorsement (when on a non-for-hire trip) should be increased from the default levels that would otherwise automatically become effective on July 1, 2020, to six swordfish per vessel per trip from July 1 through December 31, 2020, unless otherwise later noticed. These are the same limits that were implemented through an inseason adjustment for the period January 1 through June 30, 2020 (85 FR 14, January 2, 2020). Given the rebuilt status of the stock and the availability of quota, increasing the Swordfish General Commercial permit retention limits in these three regions to six fish per vessel per trip will increase the likelihood that directed swordfish landings will approach, but not exceed, the available annual swordfish quota, and increase the opportunity for catching swordfish during the 2020 fishing year.

In 2019, a six swordfish per vessel trip limit was in effect for Swordfish General Commercial permit holders in the Northwest Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and U.S. Caribbean regions for the entire fishing season. As of December 31, 2019, this limit

resulted in total annual directed swordfish landings of approximately 986 mt dw, or 32.6 percent of the 3,028.2 mt dw annual adjusted directed quota for 2019, which includes landings under the six fish trip limit.

Among the regulatory criteria for inseason adjustments to retention limits, and given the rebuilt status of the stock and availability of quota, is the requirement that NMFS consider the “effects of the adjustment on accomplishing the objectives of the fishery management plan and its amendments.” See § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(D). A consideration in deciding whether to increase the retention limit, in this case, is the objective of providing opportunities to harvest the full North Atlantic directed swordfish quota without exceeding it based upon the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP goal to, consistent with other objectives of this FMP, “manage Atlantic HMS fisheries for continuing optimum yield so as to provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation, particularly with respect to food production, providing recreational opportunities, preserving traditional fisheries, and taking into account the protection of marine ecosystems.” This action will help preserve a traditional swordfish handgear fishery (rod and reel, handline, harpoon, bandit gear, and greenstick). Although this action does not specifically provide recreational fishing opportunities, it will have a minimal impact on the recreational sector because recreational landings are counted against a separate incidental swordfish quota.

NMFS has examined dealer reports and landing trends and determined that the information obtained from biological sampling and monitoring of the North Atlantic swordfish stock is useful. See § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(A). Regarding the estimated ability of

vessels participating in the fishery to land the amount of swordfish quota available before the end of the fishing year, § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(B), NMFS reviewed electronic dealer landings data, which indicates that sufficient directed swordfish quota should be available for the July through December 2020 semi-annual quota period if recent swordfish landing trends continue. The directed swordfish quota has not been harvested for several years and, based upon current landing trends, is not likely to be harvested or exceeded in 2020. Based upon recent landings rates from dealer reports, an increase in the vessel retention limits to six fish for Swordfish General Commercial permit holders and Charter/Headboat permit holders with a commercial endorsement (when on a non-for-hire trip) in three regions is not likely to cause quotas for other categories of the fishery to be exceeded. See § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(C). Similarly, regarding the criteria about the effects of catch rates in one region precluding vessels in another region from having a reasonable opportunity to harvest a portion of the overall swordfish quota, § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(F), we expect there to be sufficient swordfish quota for the entirety of the 2020 fishing year. Thus, increased catch rates in these three regions as a result of this action would not be expected to preclude vessels in the other region (*e.g.*, the buoy gear fishery in the Florida Swordfish Management Area) from having a reasonable opportunity to harvest a portion of the overall swordfish quota.

In making adjustments to the retention limits NMFS must also consider variations in seasonal distribution, abundance, or migration patterns of swordfish, and the availability of swordfish on the fishing grounds. See § 635.24(b)(4)(iv)(G). With regard to swordfish abundance, the 2018 report by ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research

and Statistics indicated that the North Atlantic swordfish stock is not overfished ($B_{2015}/B_{msy} = 1.04$), and overfishing is not occurring ($F_{2015}/F_{msy} = 0.78$). Increasing retention limits for the General Commercial directed fishery is not expected to affect the swordfish stock status determination because any additional landings would be within the ICCAT-recommended U.S. North Atlantic swordfish quota allocation, which is consistent with conservation and management measures to prevent overfishing on the stock. Increasing opportunities by increasing retention limits from the default levels beginning on July 1, 2020, is also important because of the migratory nature and seasonal distribution of swordfish. In a particular geographic region, or waters accessible from a particular port, the amount of fishing opportunity for swordfish may be constrained by the short amount of time that the swordfish are present in the area as they migrate.

Finally, another consideration, consistent with the FMP and its amendments, is to continue to provide protection to important swordfish nursery areas and migratory corridors. Therefore, NMFS has determined that the retention limit for the Swordfish General Commercial permit will remain at zero swordfish per vessel per trip in the Florida Swordfish Management Area at this time. As discussed above, NMFS considered consistency with the 2006 HMS FMP and its amendments, and the importance for NMFS to continue to provide protection to important swordfish nursery areas and migratory corridors. As described in Amendment 8 to the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP (78 FR 52011, August 21, 2013), the area off the southeastern coast of Florida, particularly the Florida Straits, contains oceanographic features that make the area biologically unique. It provides important juvenile swordfish habitat, and is essentially a

narrow migratory corridor containing high concentrations of swordfish located in close proximity to high concentrations of people who may fish for them. Public comment on Amendment 8, including from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, indicated concern about the resultant high potential for the improper rapid growth of a commercial fishery, increased catches of undersized swordfish, the potential for larger numbers of fishermen in the area, and the potential for crowding of fishermen, which could lead to gear and user conflicts. These concerns remain valid. NMFS will continue to collect information to evaluate the appropriateness of the retention limit in the Florida Swordfish Management Area and other regional retention limits. This action therefore maintains a zero-fish retention limit in the Florida Swordfish Management Area.

The directed swordfish quota has not been harvested for several years and, based upon current landing trends, is not likely to be harvested or exceeded during 2020. This information indicates that sufficient directed swordfish quota should be available from July 1 through December 31, 2020, at the higher retention levels, within the limits of the scientifically-supported TAC and consistent with the goals of the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP as amended, ATCA, and the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and are not expected to negatively impact stock health.

Monitoring and Reporting

NMFS will continue to monitor the swordfish fishery closely during 2020 through mandatory landings and catch reports. Dealers are required to submit landing reports and negative reports (if no swordfish were purchased) on a weekly basis.

Depending upon the level of fishing effort and catch rates of swordfish, NMFS may determine that additional retention limit adjustments or closures are necessary to ensure that the available quota is not exceeded or to enhance fishing opportunities. Subsequent actions, if any, will be published in the **Federal Register**. In addition, fishermen may access <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/atlantic-highly-migratory-species/2020-atlantic-swordfish-landings-updates> for updates on quota monitoring.

Classification

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS (AA) finds that it is impracticable and contrary to the public interest to provide prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, this action for the following reasons:

Based on recent data for the first semi-annual quota period, NMFS has determined that landings have been very low through April 30, 2020 (21.9 percent of 1,318.8 mt dw quota). Adjustment of the retention limits needs to be effective on July 1, 2020; otherwise lower, default retention limits will apply. Delaying this action for prior notice and public comment would unnecessarily limit opportunities to harvest available directed swordfish quota, which may have negative social and economic impacts for U.S. fishermen. If this action is delayed, some fishermen may not benefit from the adjustment at all, given a short period of access to the fishery due to seasonal fish migration. This action does not raise conservation and management concerns. Adjusting retention limits does not affect the overall, North Atlantic swordfish U.S. quota, and available data show the adjustment would have a minimal risk of exceeding the ICCAT-allocated quota. NMFS notes that the public had an opportunity to comment on the underlying

rulemakings that established the U.S. swordfish quota and retention limit adjustment criteria. Therefore, the AA finds good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B) to waive prior notice and the opportunity for public comment. For all of the above reasons, there is also good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) to waive the 30-day delay in effectiveness.

This action is being taken under 50 CFR 635.24(b)(4) and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.* and 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: June 19, 2020.

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