

Dated: June 22, 2004

Dear Reviewer:

In accordance with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, we enclose for your review the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for a Final Rule to Implement Management Measures to Reduce Bycatch and Bycatch Mortality of Atlantic Sea Turtles in the Atlantic pelagic longline (PLL) fishery. The preferred alternatives in the Final SEIS would provide significant benefits to endangered and threatened Atlantic sea turtles by reducing bycatch and bycatch mortality, based on the findings of a three year research experiment in the Northeast Distant Statistical Area (NED), and other available sea turtle bycatch reduction studies.

Several changes from the Draft SEIS were made, including modifying the preferred hook and bait requirements both inside and outside the NED. The preferred alternatives in the Final SEIS would limit vessel operators participating in the PLL fishery for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (Atlantic HMS), operating outside of the NED, at all times, to possessing onboard and/or using only 16/0 or larger non-offset circle hooks and/or 18/0 or larger circle hooks with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees. Only whole finfish and squid baits may be possessed and/or utilized with allowable hooks outside the NED. PLL fishing in the NED closed area would be allowed for vessels possessing and/or using only 18/0 or larger circle hooks with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees. Only mackerel and squid baits may be possessed and/or utilized with allowable hooks, within the NED. In addition a preferred alternative would require vessel operators aboard all federally permitted vessels, or those required to be permitted, for Atlantic HMS with PLL gear onboard to possess and maintain line cutters and dipnets meeting newly revised design and performance standards, and to possess, maintain, and utilize additional equipment, in compliance with sea turtle handling protocols, to remove fishing gear from incidentally-captured sea turtles.

A new Biological Opinion (2004 BiOp) issued for the Atlantic PLL fishery on June 1, 2004 found that the preferred alternatives are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of loggerhead, green, hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, or olive ridley sea turtles, but is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of leatherback sea turtles. The 2004 BiOp included a Reasonable and Prudent Alternative to avoid jeopardizing leatherbacks.

To more rapidly introduce fishing gears intended to reduce sea turtle interactions and to mitigate the economic impacts of sea turtle bycatch mitigation measures, the National Marine Fisheries Service has requested and been authorized to execute alternative procedures for the preparation and completion of this SEIS. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) has authorized a waiver of 26 of the standard 30 day period before the record of decision on this action can be finalized.

All comments should be submitted by June 29, 2004. Written comments should be sent by mail to Christopher Rogers, Chief, Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Management Division (SF/1), National Marine Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Comments may also be submitted by facsimile (fax) to 301-713-1917. Electronic comments may be submitted by e-mail to 0648-AR80.final@noaa.gov, include in the comment subject line the following FSEIS identifier: 0648-AR80. Also, a copy of your comments should be submitted to me by mail to the NOAA Strategic Planning Office (PPI/SP), SSMC3, Room 15603, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910; by fax to 301-713-0585; or by e-mail to nepa.comments@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,

Susan A. Kennedy
Acting NEPA Coordinator