

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON FUTURE COUNCIL MEETING AGENDA AND WORKLOAD PLANNING

The Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) met May 13-15, 2015, and heard from two HMS exempted fishing permit (EFP) applicants who are asking for changes in the conditions the Council recommended when in March 2015 it approved their applications for review by National Marine Fisheries Service.

Dr. Chugey Sepulveda of the Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research (PIER) explained the anticipated consequences of the Council's recommended 100% observer coverage requirement for this EFP to test deep-set buoy gear. Due to the high cost of observers, the number of participating vessels will need to be scaled back substantially. This will limit the number of EFP sets that can be fished and the volume of data derived from the EFP. Dr. Sepulveda has indicated the cost of observing three vessels at 100% observer coverage would be \$75,000; observer cost at 100% coverage would constrain the vessels that could participate from five vessels to two. In this instance, a 100% observer coverage requirement creates a limit on the total amount of effort that can be obtained from a research perspective without increasing the amount of effort to characterize sensitive species interaction risk. The HMSMT notes that this gear type has been tested under research conditions for several years and has demonstrated minimal bycatch and protected species interactions. The applicant is a research institution and has carefully designed the EFP so that unbiased data can be gathered. For these reasons the HMSMT recommends that the Council reconsider the 100% observer requirement for this EFP.

An increased amount of effort would allow investigation of questions such as target and non-target species catch rate variability between vessels, and gear efficacy over broader spatial and seasonal ranges. A fixed observer budget will allow the same observer sample size regardless of the coverage rate. For example, a level of 20% observer coverage could allow PIER to include additional vessels and afford five times as much effort as with the 100% coverage requirement, with no increase in observer costs.

The Council approved two other EFP applications to test buoy gear. These applicants have not approached the HMSMT with concerns over providing 100% observer coverage. As with the PIER application, the risk of protected species interactions is likely to be low to nonexistent based on past PIER-sponsored research and development for this gear type. However, the rationale of assuring accurate data reporting by having scientific observers on board would be more relevant for these applications. PIER is a research institution with four years of experience using the method, while the other buoy gear applicants are commercial fishers with no experience using the gear. For the PIER application, the Council's condition for observer coverage should be tempered to ensure that the activity in the application can proceed.

David Haworth expressed similar concern to the HMSMT about the Council's recommendation from March 2015 that only one vessel participate in the EFP to test longline gear inside the EEZ. The HMSMT recommends amending the March 2015 Council decision to allow at least two vessels to participate. Additional effort would allow catch rates of target and non-target species to be measured with greater precision, and provide additional flexibility to compare and contrast SSL and deep-set longline (DSL) across vessels. Scientists from the Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC) indicate that effort from only a single vessel will not provide sufficient information; increasing the number of participants would contribute towards gathering a greater volume of data, which would support more precise estimates of target species catch and non-target species interaction rates.

The HMSMT notes that concerns about insufficient fishing effort is common across all of these EFPs. On the one hand, the Council imposed conditions with the intent of minimizing risk to protected species.

However, the effort limitations are a substantial constraint on collecting sufficient information, particularly about rare event bycatch.

There is growing interest from harpoon and DGN fishers in using buoy gear to augment their current operations, and the HMSMT feels it is important to support this momentum. Buoy gear is a component of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified Atlantic swordfish fishery. Members of the conservation community support authorization as an HMS gear. The HMSMT is confident there is enough information for the Council to begin the authorization process.

The HMSMT submits this report under Agenda Item F.5 to prompt Council discussion of how the following recommendations may be addressed in the Council process:

- Reduce observer coverage requirement in PIER EFP to the originally requested 20% to 30% range
- Increase the number of vessels allowed to participate in the Dupuy/Haworth/Gibbs longline EFP
- Scope the process of authorizing buoy gear as an HMS FMP gear

PFMC
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