

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE REPORT ON MEETINGS WITH
CALIFORNIA DRIFT GILLNET FISHERMEN

During the Highly Migratory Species discussions at the September 2011 Council meeting, one of the agenda items included a National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) report that summarized the results of its Swordfish Workshop held in May that was entitled “Working Towards Sustainability.” Some of the conclusions of the workshop expanded on some past ideas regarding gear and operational modifications, including re-examining the science justifying a 3-month leatherback sea turtle closed area, experimenting with other gears to increase fishing selectivity, and looking at opportunities to form partnerships. Since that time, there has been continuing dialogue with the swordfish fleet including discussions at the Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) meetings in January, a questionnaire sent out by the California Department of Fish and Game and two impromptu meetings with NMFS and drift gillnet (DGN) representatives in Morro Bay and Monterey. Ideas that were presented at the Morro Bay meeting included input from some of the DGN fishermen operating out of San Diego.

This report summarizes the ideas discussed at the Morro Bay and Monterey meetings with representatives from the DGN fleet held in early February. The purpose of the meetings was to hear ideas for increasing local swordfish production so that U.S. consumers have a greater choice of a sustainable seafood source, attracting new entrants into the fishery, and participating in sea turtle conservation efforts. The results of the meetings can be organized into four major themes: 1) operational changes - minor tweaks to the time/area leatherback closure and to the gear; 2) financial incentives to try other gears; 3) predicted location of leatherbacks during fishing; and 4) international sea turtle conservation issues.

For operational changes, attendees acknowledged that considerable information has come forward since the boundaries of the 3-month leatherback closure were initially established in 2001. The fleet suggested that an analysis be undertaken that would look at the effects of moving the Point Sur line due west, changing the season to open on August 1 rather than August 15, and opening the northern area on November 1 rather than November 15. There is also a “morning 2-hour after sunrise time limit” for retrieving gear that was first put in place when there were over 200 permits, and was implemented to minimize conflicts with the marlin sport fleet. The fleet asked this also be re-examined. Finally, there was interest expressed about expanding the nets in length by 25 percent.

With regard to potential gear switching, attendees noted that there are considerable costs tied up with their current investments in smaller vessels and net gear. However, there was interest expressed by some that, if there were financial incentives to test the efficacy of the gears, fishermen would be willing to consider switching to other gears such as pelagic longlines using circle hook/mackerel bait and buoy gear currently being evaluated. Where these financial incentives would come from was not discussed in detail, although there was agreement about the potential for funding assistance coming from the private sector.

At the Morro Bay meeting, there was a short discussion about programs that would use best available data on sea-surface temperature and ocean-current conditions to provide the predicted location of waters preferred by sea turtles, such as what is being done in Hawaii with NMFS’ “TurtleWatch” Program. The TurtleWatch Program provides up-to-date maps to fishermen,

highlighting areas of potential overlap between loggerheads and longline gear so that fishermen can avoid those areas and reduce interactions. There was some interest in developing a similar program for California to reduce interactions with leatherbacks.

There were discussions about interest assisting in international turtle conservation issues, although it was recognized that the reality of the economic constraints of current regulations and the limited number of remaining participants in the drift net fishery would not materialize into any significant financial contributions. In other words, fishermen could impose a conservation tax on themselves that would be used to benefit sea turtle conservation in other areas, but that the amount would be marginal, although there was some discussion about leveraging those funds. It was pointed out that there was a voluntary effort years ago to create a conservation tax, but that was met with little success due to the inability to create an equitable fundraising process for enabling swordfish fishermen to invest in conservation projects. However, the funds that were raised were used to assist in sea turtle nesting beach recovery in Mexico from 2005 through 2007. Attendees also mentioned that their expertise based on gear improvements and knowledge of the fishery could be shared with NMFS and solution-oriented non-government organizations for the purpose of benefiting conservation efforts in other Pacific swordfish fisheries.

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