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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 300

[Docket No. 130717632-4285-02]

RIN 0648-XE085

**International Fisheries; Pacific Tuna Fisheries; 2015 Bigeye Tuna Longline Fishery
Closure in the Eastern Pacific Ocean**

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

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS is temporarily closing the U.S. pelagic longline fishery for bigeye tuna for vessels over 24 meters in overall length in the eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) through December 31, 2015 because the 2015 catch limit of 500 metric tons is expected to be reached. This action is necessary to prevent the fishery from exceeding the applicable catch limit established by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) in Resolution C-13-01, which governs tuna conservation in the EPO from 2014-2016.

DATES: The rule is effective 12 a.m. local time August 12, 2015, through 11:59 p.m. local time December 31, 2015.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Taylor Debevec, NMFS West Coast Region, 562-980-4066.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The United States is a member of the IATTC, which was established under the Convention for the Establishment of an Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission signed in 1949 (Convention). The Convention provides an international agreement to ensure the effective international conservation and management of highly migratory species of fish in the IATTC Convention Area. The IATTC Convention Area, as amended by the Antigua Convention, includes the waters of the EPO bounded by the coast of the Americas, the 50° N. and 50° S. parallels, and the 150° W. meridian.

Pelagic longline fishing in the EPO is managed, in part, under the Tuna Conventions Act of 1950 (Act), 16 U.S.C. 951-962. Under the Act, NMFS must publish regulations to carry out recommendations of the IATTC that have been approved by the Department of State (DOS). Regulations governing fishing by U.S. vessels in accordance with the Act appear at 50 CFR part 300, subpart C. These regulations implement IATTC recommendations for the conservation and management of highly migratory fish resources in the EPO.

In 2013, the IATTC adopted Resolution C-13-01, which establishes an annual catch limit of bigeye tuna for longline vessels over 24 meters. For calendar years 2014, 2015, and 2016, the catch of bigeye tuna by longline gear in the IATTC Convention Area by fishing vessels of the United States that are over 24 meters in overall length is limited to 500 metric tons per year. With the approval of the DOS, NMFS implemented this catch limit by notice-and-comment rulemaking under the Act (79 FR 19487, April 9, 2014, and codified at 50 CFR 300.25).

NMFS, through monitoring the retained catches of bigeye tuna using logbook data submitted by vessel captains and other available information from the longline fisheries in the IATTC Convention Area, has determined that the 2015 catch limit is expected to be reached by August 12, 2015. In accordance with 50 CFR 300.25(b), this **Federal Register** notice announces

that the U.S. longline fishery for bigeye tuna in the IATTC Convention Area will be closed for vessels over 24 meters in overall length starting on August 12, 2015, through the end of the 2015 calendar year. The 2016 fishing year is scheduled to open on January 1, 2016. The bigeye tuna catch limit for longline vessels over 24 meters in overall length will again be 500 metric tons for 2016.

During the closure, a U.S. fishing vessel over 24 meters in overall length may not be used to retain on board, transship, or land bigeye tuna captured by longline gear in the IATTC Convention Area, except as follows:

- Any bigeye tuna already on board a fishing vessel on August 12, 2015, may be retained on board, transshipped, and/or landed, to the extent authorized by applicable laws and regulations, provided all bigeye tuna are landed within 14 days after the effective date of this rule, that is, no later than August 26, 2015.
- In the case of a vessel that has declared to NMFS that the current trip type is shallow-set longlining, the 14-day limit to land all bigeye in the previous paragraph is waived. However, the prohibition on any additional retention of bigeye tuna still applies as of August 12, 2015.

Other prohibitions during the closure include the following:

- Bigeye tuna caught by a United States vessel over 24 meters in overall length with longline gear in the IATTC Convention Area may not be transshipped to a fishing vessel unless that fishing vessel is operated in compliance with a valid permit issued under 50 CFR 660.707 or 665.801.¹

¹In 50 CFR 300.25(b)(4)(ii), the reference to § 665.21 is outdated. The former 50 CFR 665.21 has been recodified to § 665.801.

- A fishing vessel of the United States over 24 meters in overall length, that is not on a declared shallow-set longline trip, may not be used to fish in the Pacific Ocean using longline gear both inside and outside the IATTC Convention Area during the same fishing trip, with the exception of a fishing trip that was already in progress when the prohibitions were put into effect.
- If a vessel over 24 meters in overall length, that is not on a declared shallow-set longline trip, is used to fish in the Pacific Ocean using longline gear outside the IATTC Convention Area, and the vessel enters the IATTC Convention Area at any time during the same fishing trip, the longline gear on the fishing vessel must be stowed in a manner so as not to be readily available for fishing. Specifically, the hooks, branch lines, and floats must be stowed and not available for immediate use, and any power-operated mainline hauler on deck must be covered in such a manner that it is not readily available for use.

Classification

NMFS has determined there is good cause to waive prior notice and opportunity for public comment pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B). This action is based on the best available information and is necessary for the conservation and management of bigeye tuna. Compliance with the notice and comment requirement would be impracticable and contrary to the public interest because NMFS would be unable to ensure that the 2015 bigeye tuna catch limit applicable to longline vessels over 24 meters is not exceeded. The annual catch limit is an important mechanism to ensure that the United States complies with its international obligations in preventing overfishing and managing the fishery at optimum yield. Moreover, NMFS previously solicited, and considered, public comments on the rule that established the catch limit

(79 FR 19487, April 9, 2014), including a provision for issuing a notice to close the fishery, if necessary, to prevent exceeding the catch limit. For the same reasons, NMFS has also determined there is good cause to waive the requirement for a 30-day delay in effectiveness under 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3).

This action is required by 50 CFR 300.25(b) and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 951 *et seq.*

Dated: July 31, 2015

Jennifer M. Wallace,
Acting Director,
Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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