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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 635

[Docket No. 180117042-8884-02; RTID 0648-XA544]

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fisheries

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

ACTION: Temporary rule; quota transfer and closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS transfers 40 metric tons (mt) of Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) quota from the Reserve category to the October through November 2020 General category subquota period and closes the General category fishery until the General category reopens on December 1, 2020. The quota transfer is intended to provide additional fishing opportunities based on consideration of the regulatory determination criteria regarding inseason adjustments and applies to Atlantic tunas General category (commercial) permitted vessels and Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Charter/Headboat category permitted vessels with a commercial sale endorsement when fishing commercially for BFT. Given that the adjusted quota is projected to be caught quickly, the closure is being filed simultaneously to prevent overharvest of the adjusted General category October through November 2020 BFT subquota.

DATES: The quota transfer is effective [*insert date of filing for public inspection with the Office of the Federal Register*], through November 30, 2020. The closure is effective 11:30 p.m., local time, October 9, 2020, through November 30, 2020.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Sarah McLaughlin or Nicholas Velseboer, 978-281-9260, or Larry Redd, 301-427-8503.

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 BFT by persons and vessels subject to U.S. jurisdiction are found at 50 CFR part 635. Section 635.27 subdivides the U.S. BFT quota recommended by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and as implemented by the United States among the various domestic fishing categories, per the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (2006 Consolidated HMS FMP) (71 FR 58058, October 2, 2006) and amendments. 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.

Under § 635.28(a)(1), NMFS files a closure notice with the Office of the Federal Register for publication when a BFT quota (or subquota) is reached or is projected to be reached. Retaining, possessing, or landing BFT under that quota category is prohibited on or after the effective date and time of a closure notice for that category until the opening of the relevant subsequent quota period or until such date as specified.

The current baseline General and Reserve category quotas are 555.7 mt and 29.5 mt, respectively. See § 635.27(a). Each of the General category time periods (January, June through August, September, October through November, and December) is allocated a “subquota” or portion of the annual General category quota. The baseline

subquotas for each time period are as follows: 29.5 mt for January; 277.9 mt for June through August; 147.3 mt for September; 72.2 mt for October through November; and 28.9 mt for December. Any unused General category quota rolls forward from one time period to the next, and is available for use in subsequent time periods. To date, NMFS has taken several actions that resulted in adjustments to the General and Reserve category quotas, resulting in currently adjusted quotas of 128.7 mt of quota for the Reserve category, 100 mt for the General category January through March 2020 subquota period, and 9.4 mt for the December 2020 subquota period (85 FR 17, January 2, 2020; 85 FR 6828, February 6, 2020; 85 FR 43148, July 16, 2020; 85 FR 59445, September 22, 2020; and 85 FR 61872, October 1, 2020).

Transfer of 40 mt from the Reserve Category to the General Category

Under § 635.27(a)(9), NMFS has the authority to transfer quota among fishing categories or subcategories, after considering regulatory determination criteria provided under § 635.27(a)(8). NMFS has considered all of the relevant determination criteria and their applicability to this inseason quota transfer. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:

Regarding the usefulness of information obtained from catches in the particular category for biological sampling and monitoring of the status of the stock (§ 635.27(a)(8)(i)), biological samples collected from BFT landed by General category fishermen and provided by bluefin tuna dealers continue to provide valuable data for ongoing scientific studies of BFT age and growth, migration, and reproductive status. Additional opportunity to land BFT in the General category would support the continued collection of a broad range of data for these studies and for stock monitoring purposes.

NMFS also considered the catches of the General category quota to date (including during the fall and winter fisheries in the last several years), and the likelihood of closure of that segment of the fishery if no adjustment is made (§ 635.27(a)(8)(ii) and (ix)). Preliminary landings data as of October 7, 2020, indicate that the General category landed 67.3 mt for the October through November period. This represents 93 percent of the baseline October through November subquota (72.2 mt). At the time of drafting of this inseason action, the General category subquota has not yet been exceeded, but without a quota transfer at this time, NMFS would likely close the General category fishery shortly, and participants would have to stop bluefin tuna fishing activities while commercial-sized bluefin tuna remain available in the areas where General category permitted vessels operate at this time of year. Transferring 40 mt of quota from the Reserve category would result in 112.2 mt being available for the October through November 2020 subquota period, thus effectively providing limited additional opportunities to harvest the U.S. bluefin tuna quota while avoiding exceeding it. Given the lag between initiation of an inseason action and its implementation, however, this notice also closes the fishery, as NMFS anticipates the transferred quota will be caught quickly. NMFS plans to account for General category overharvest from the September 2020 subquota period (preliminarily 43.5 mt as of October 7, 2020), as well as additional landings from the June through August period not previously accounted for in 85 FR 59445 (September 22, 2020), in a subsequent notice, such as the notice NMFS would prepare to announce a quota transfer from the Reserve to the General category December subquota period.

Regarding the projected ability of the vessels fishing under the particular category quota (here, the General category) to harvest the additional amount of BFT quota transferred before the end of the fishing year (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iii)), NMFS anticipates that all of the 40 mt of transferred quota will be used by October 9, based on current figures and the amount of quota being transferred, but this is also subject to weather conditions and BFT availability. In the unlikely event that any of this quota is unused by November 30, such quota will roll forward to the next subperiod within the calendar year (*i.e.*, the December period), and NMFS anticipates that it would be used before the end of the fishing year. Thus, this quota transfer would allow fishermen to take advantage of the availability of fish on the fishing grounds, and provide a reasonable opportunity to harvest the full U.S. BFT quota.

NMFS also considered the estimated amounts by which quotas for other gear categories of the fishery might be exceeded (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iv)) and the ability to account for all 2020 landings and dead discards. In the last several years, total U.S. BFT landings have been below the available U.S. quota such that the United States has carried forward the maximum amount of underharvest allowed by ICCAT from one year to the next. NMFS will need to account for 2020 landings and dead discards within the adjusted U.S. quota, consistent with ICCAT recommendations, and anticipates having sufficient quota to do that, even with the 40-mt transfer to the General category for the October through November fishery. NMFS anticipates that General category participants in all areas and time periods will have opportunities to harvest the General category quota in 2020, through active inseason management such as the timing of quota transfers, as practicable. Thus, this quota transfer would allow fishermen to take advantage of the availability of

fish on the fishing grounds to the extent consistent with the available amount of transferrable quota and other management objectives, while avoiding quota exceedance.

NMFS also considered the effects of the adjustment on the BFT stock and the effects of the transfer on accomplishing the objectives of the FMP (§ 635.27(a)(8)(v) and (vi)). This transfer would be consistent with the current quotas, which were established and analyzed in the 2018 BFT quota final rule (83 FR 51391, October 11, 2018), and with objectives of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments and is not expected to negatively impact stock health or to affect the stock in ways not already analyzed in those documents. Another principal consideration is the objective of providing opportunities to harvest the full annual U.S. BFT quota without exceeding it based on the goals of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments, including to achieve optimum yield on a continuing basis and to optimize the ability of all permit categories to harvest their full BFT quota allocations (related to § 635.27(a)(8)(x)). Specific to the General category, this includes providing opportunity equitably across all time periods.

Based on the considerations above, NMFS is transferring 40 mt of the available 128.7 mt of Reserve category quota to the General category for the October through November 2020 fishery, resulting in a subquota of 112.2 mt for the October through November 2020 fishery and 88.7 mt in the Reserve category.

Closure of the October through November 2020 General Category Fishery

Based on the best available landings information for the General category BFT fishery, NMFS has determined that the adjusted October through November subquota of 112.2 mt, adjusted in this action, is projected to be reached shortly (*i.e.*, as of October 7,

reported landings total approximately 67.3 mt) and that the General category should be closed. Therefore, retaining, possessing, or landing large medium or giant BFT by persons aboard vessels permitted in the Atlantic tunas General category and HMS Charter/Headboat category (while fishing commercially) must cease at 11:30 p.m. local time on October 9, 2020. The General category will automatically reopen December 1, 2020, for the December 2020 subquota time period. This action applies to Atlantic tunas General category (commercial) permitted vessels and HMS Charter/Headboat category permitted vessels with a commercial sale endorsement when fishing commercially for BFT, and is taken consistent with the regulations at § 635.28(a)(1). The intent of this closure is to prevent overharvest of the available adjusted October through November subquota.

Fishermen may catch and release (or tag and release) BFT of all sizes, subject to the requirements of the catch-and-release and tag-and-release programs at § 635.26. All BFT that are released must be handled in a manner that will maximize their survival, and without removing the fish from the water, consistent with requirements at § 635.21(a)(1). For additional information on safe handling, see the “Careful Catch and Release” brochure available at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/outreach-and-education/careful-catch-and-release-brochure/>.

Monitoring and Reporting

NMFS will continue to monitor the BFT fisheries closely. Dealers are required to submit landing reports within 24 hours of a dealer receiving BFT. Late reporting by dealers compromises NMFS’ ability to timely implement actions such as quota and retention limit adjustment, as well as closures, and may result in enforcement actions.

Additionally, and separate from the dealer reporting requirement, General and HMS Charter/Headboat category vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead within 24 hours of the landing(s) or end of each trip, by accessing hmspermits.noaa.gov, using the HMS Catch Reporting app, or calling (888) 872-8862 (Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.).

After the fishery reopens on December 1, depending on the level of fishing effort and catch rates of BFT, NMFS may determine that additional adjustments are necessary to ensure available subquotas are not exceeded or to enhance scientific data collection from, and fishing opportunities in, all geographic areas. If needed, subsequent adjustments will be published in the **Federal Register**. In addition, fishermen may call the Atlantic Tunas Information Line at (978) 281-9260, or access hmspermits.noaa.gov, for updates on quota monitoring and inseason adjustments.

Classification

NMFS issues this action pursuant to section 305(d) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. This action is required by 50 CFR part 635, which was issued pursuant to section 304(c), and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS finds that pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B), there is good cause to waive prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, for the following reasons: The regulations implementing the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments provide for inseason retention limit adjustments to respond to the unpredictable nature of BFT availability on the fishing grounds, the migratory nature of this species, and the regional variations in the BFT fishery. This fishery is currently underway and delaying this action would be contrary to the public interest as it could

result in BFT landings exceeding the adjusted October through November 2020 General category quota. Affording prior notice and opportunity for public comment to implement the quota transfer is impracticable and contrary to the public interest as such a delay would likely result in exceedance of the General category October through November fishery subquota or earlier closure of the fishery while fish are available on the fishing grounds. Subquota exceedance may result in the need to reduce quota for the General category later in the year and thus could affect later fishing opportunities. This action does not raise conservation and management concerns. Transferring quota from the Reserve category to the General category does not affect the overall U.S. BFT quota, and available data shows 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. BFT quota and the inseason adjustment criteria. For all of the above reasons, there is good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) to waive the 30-day delay in effectiveness.

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

Dated: October 8, 2020.

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