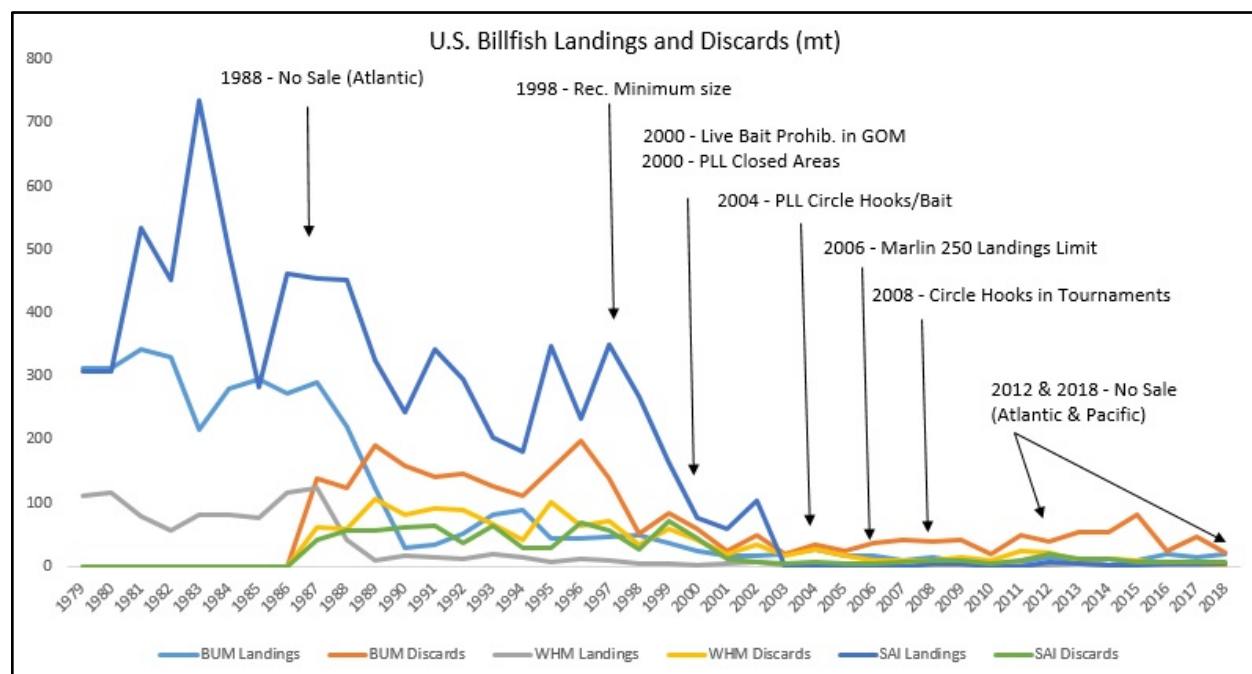


## TIMELINE OF U.S. ATLANTIC BILLFISH MANAGEMENT MEASURES

### Information Paper Submitted by the United States



**Figure 1. U.S. billfish landings and discards (mt) 1979-2018.**

#### **1978: Preliminary Fishery Management Plan (PMP) for Atlantic Billfishes and Sharks**

In 1978, the U.S. implemented regulations (43 FR 3818, January 27, 1978) to govern foreign fishing and incidental catch of billfishes and sharks in the U.S. Fishery Conservation Zone (later changed to the Exclusive Economic Zone). The 1978 PMP undertook fishery management measures designed to minimize conflict between domestic and foreign fishing for billfish and sharks, including restricting the total catch of billfish allowed by foreign vessels operating in the U.S. EEZ to zero and requiring release of billfish by these vessels without removal from the water, encouraging international management, and maintaining availability of these resources.

#### **1988: Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic Billfish**

In 1988, the U.S. implemented the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic billfish (53 FR 37765, September 28, 1988). The 1988 FMP, among other things, defined the Atlantic management unit to include species of sailfish white marlin, blue marlin, and longbill spearfish. The FMP prohibited the sale of Atlantic billfish. The FMP also established recreational minimum size limits for Atlantic billfish and prohibited possession of Atlantic billfish by commercial longline and certain other commercial vessels. The FMP restricted the retention of billfish shoreward of the outer boundary of the U.S. EEZ to those caught by rod and reel, and initiated mandatory tournament reporting. Importantly, the U.S. required all billfish caught on commercial gear be released “in a manner that will ensure maximum probability of survival,” by cutting the line near the hook without removing the fish from the water.

### **1997 and 1998: Atlantic Blue & White Marlins and West Atlantic Sailfish Declared Overfished**

In 1997, ICCAT adopted Recommendation 97-09, requiring landings reductions of at least 25 percent from 1996 levels by the end of 1999 for Atlantic blue and white marlin, and the U.S. implemented interim regulations increasing the minimum size limits for Atlantic blue and white marlin (63 FR 14030, March 24, 1998; 63 FR 51859, September 29, 1998). Ultimately, the recreational minimum sizes were established at 99 inches lower jaw fork length (LJFL) and 66 inches (LJFL), respectively. The minimum size limit increases were estimated to reduce recreational landings by 46 percent by number and 39 percent by weight for blue marlin, and by 53 percent by number and weight for white marlin from 1996 levels. Additionally, these rules further strengthened tournament registration and reporting requirements for billfishes. Furthermore, the 1998 rule established a recreational retention limit of one Atlantic blue or white marlin per vessel per trip. To meet conservation goals, the U.S. recreational community was encouraged to release their live billfish catches.

### **1999: Amendment 1 to the Atlantic Billfish FMP**

In 1999, the United States implemented Amendment 1 to the Atlantic Billfish FMP (64 FR 29090, May 28, 1999). This amendment, among other things, established a 63 inches (LJFL) minimum size for western Atlantic sailfish, prohibited retention of longbill spearfish, removed recreational bag limits, established a catch and release recreational fishery management program and established a foundation to develop a 10-year international rebuilding plan. Additionally, this plan redefined the management unit for Atlantic blue and white marlins as the entire Atlantic Ocean. This action prohibited removal of fish from the water that were under the minimum size and required measurement of the fish while still in the water. The United States also implemented the FMP for Tunas, Swordfish, and Sharks, which limited entry in the swordfish and shark fishery, capping the number of pelagic longline vessels and began a process of capacity reduction through attrition. Reduced pelagic longline fishing effort resulted in reduced billfish interactions and discards. This amendment estimated that since 1988, annual U.S. recreational landings of blue marlin had been reduced by 73%, and annual U.S. recreational landings of white marlin had been reduced by 90%, relative to levels prior to implementation of the FMP for Atlantic Billfish and subsequent measures (1980 – 1988).

### **2000: U.S. Implements Regulatory Amendment 1 and Time/Area Closures**

In 2000, the United States implemented regulations that prohibited the use of live bait on pelagic longline gear in the Gulf of Mexico and prohibited the use of pelagic longline gear at certain times and in certain areas off the coast of the Southeastern United States and in the Gulf of Mexico (65 FR 47214, August 1, 2000). Prohibiting the use of live bait was expected to provide a 10 to 46 percent reduction in billfish discards in the Gulf of Mexico. Partially as a result of the time/area closures, overall pelagic longline fishing effort, expressed as the number of hooks fished, declined by 26.2 percent from 1997-1999 to 2005–2017. Additionally, partially as a result of the time/area closures, reported billfish (blue marlin, white marlin, and sailfish) discards decreased by 33–60 percent from 1997–1999 to 2005–2017. It is important to note that, although circle hooks were not mandatory at this time, U.S. recreational fishermen were encouraged to increase survival of released fish through the use of dehooking devices, circle hooks, and other gear modifications that could reduce stress on the hooked fish.

### **2002-2003: U.S. Implements ICCAT Recommendations 00-13 and 02-13**

In order to further meet the obligations of ICCAT Recommendations 00-13 and 02-13, the United States established a comprehensive monitoring program for all recreational and non-recreational landings of

marlin, sailfish, and swordfish through regulations implemented in two final rules (67 FR 77434, December 18, 2002; 68 FR 711, January 7, 2003).

**2004: U.S. Requires Use of Circle Hooks, Bait Requirements, and Safe Handling Release Gears on Pelagic Longline Vessels**

In 2004, the United States implemented regulations (69 FR 40733, July 6, 2004) requiring that all pelagic longline vessels use either 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 or squid baits were allowed to be possessed onboard. Vessels fishing in the Northeast Distant area (a large area of the North Atlantic high seas) were required to use the 18/0 or larger circle hooks with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees. These regulations were specifically implemented to mitigate sea turtle bycatch and bycatch mortality for all Atlantic vessels that had pelagic longline gear onboard. Impacts on billfish bycatch and bycatch mortality were not quantified in this action; however, subsequent data has demonstrated that reductions in billfish bycatch and mortality were significant.

**2006: U.S. Implements the Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species FMP**

In 2006, the Atlantic Billfish FMP was combined with the 1999 FMP for Tunas, Swordfish, and Sharks, and its amendments, resulting in the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP (71 FR 58058, October 2, 2006). Among other things, the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP limited all HMS permitted vessels fishing in Atlantic billfish tournaments to deploying non-offset circle hooks when using natural bait or natural bait/artificial lure combinations (effective in 2007). The Consolidated HMS FMP further strengthened the implementation of the annual recreational landings limit specified in ICCAT Recommendations 00-13 and 04-09 by establishing procedures to adjust marlin size limits inseason. Implementing the circle hook requirement in Atlantic billfish tournaments was estimated to result in a decrease of white marlin post-release mortalities by approximately 23 percent overall, resulting in an estimated 303 (range: 141 – 508) fish released alive that would otherwise be expected to die, on average. There were also expected to be additional, unquantified benefits in terms of decreased post-release mortality for blue marlin and sailfish.

**2010: U.S. Adds Roundscale Spearfish (*Tetrapturus georgii*) to Atlantic HMS Regulations and Recognizes the Change of the Genus of White Marlin from *Tetrapturus* to *Kajikia***

In 2010, the United States implemented regulations that added roundscale spearfish (*Tetrapturus georgii*), to the definition of terms in the domestic fishery regulations (75 FR 57698, September 22, 2010). This final action also implemented a minimum size limit for roundscale spearfish that was the same as white marlin and included roundscale spearfish in the blue and white marlin combined recreational landings limit. Additionally, this final action recognized the change of the genus of white marlin from *Tetrapturus* to *Kajikia* in the implementing regulations of the MSA and the Atlantic HMS regulations to reflect a recent taxonomic change.

**2014: Amendment 7 to the Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP**

In 2014, the United States implemented Amendment 7 to the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS FMP (79 FR 71509, December 12, 2014). This action was primarily intended to ensure sustainable management of western Atlantic bluefin tuna; however, beneficial effects for billfish stocks were expected. Amendment 7, among other things, established individual vessel bluefin tuna quotas (IBQ) and additional monitoring requirements to support the IBQ program in the pelagic longline fishery for Atlantic HMS. A recent review of the IBQ program has indicated a reduction in fishing effort, including in the number of active

pelagic longline vessels (2012-2014 average of 116 vessels; 2015-2017 average of 92 vessels), and the number of pelagic longline trips (reduction of 42 percent since 2012).

### **2012 and 2018: U.S. Billfish Conservation Act**

The Billfish Conservation Act of 2012 was signed into law on October 5, 2012, and was amended on August 2, 2018. The Act applies to billfish in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and prohibits any person from offering billfish or billfish products for sale, selling them, or having custody, control, or possession of them for purposes of offering them for sale. It included a limited exemption for billfish caught by U.S. fishing vessels and landed and retained in Hawaii or Pacific Insular Areas. Although the sale of Atlantic billfish was prohibited prior to the Billfish Conservation Act, this Act provided unquantifiable, but clear conservation benefits for Atlantic billfish by prohibiting all commercial billfish sales or activities, regardless of origin, in the continental United States.