

July 15, 2021

Mr. Randy Blankinship  
HMS Management Division  
Office of Sustainable Fisheries, F/SF1  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

RE: NOAA-NMFS-2018-0035

We the undersigned organizations representing recreational fishermen, conservationists, and scientists appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments on the reconsideration of the conversion of the Spring Gulf of Mexico Gear Restricted Areas (GRAs) to a Monitoring Area. Our diverse coalition is unified in our opposition to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries' April 2020 rulemaking that reopened the Gulf GRAs to pelagic longline fishing. The reopening of the GRAs was met with overwhelming public opposition and, most importantly, was inconsistent with science-based policy. The GRAs proved a highly effective conservation measure to protect western Atlantic bluefin tuna at the peak of their spawn. Removing them potentially harms western Atlantic bluefin tuna, as well as U.S. commercial and recreational fishermen. Information collected since the removal of the GRAs reinforces the importance of these time-area closures. Consistent with Congress's directive within Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations legislation, we urge NOAA Fisheries to take this opportunity to reinstate the GRAs.

Starting in 2015, NOAA Fisheries closed two areas totaling 26,858 square miles in the Gulf of Mexico during April and May to pelagic longline fishing. Following more than six years of scientific analysis and stakeholder consultation, NOAA Fisheries designed the GRAs to balance fishing opportunities with protections for depleted western Atlantic bluefin tuna at the peak of their spawn in their primary spawning area. Between 2015 and 2019, the Gulf GRAs successfully mitigated the decades-old problem of high mortality and dead discards of spawning bluefin. Actual conservation benefits ultimately exceeded those NOAA Fisheries projected during rule development. During the three years the GRAs were in effect, bluefin mortality decreased 88 percent in April and 81 percent in May, when compared to the three years prior to the GRAs. Dead discards totaled just 2.5 mt in 2019, down from 69 mt in 2012, a 96 percent reduction. Not only were bluefin protected during the GRA period, but there was a concurrent 38 percent increase in target catch of yellowfin tuna for the Gulf pelagic longline fishery.

While NOAA Fisheries is now asking for ["additional information that would inform the agency's reconsideration of the Spring Gulf of Mexico Monitoring Area,"](#) the agency already had these documented successes at hand when it decided to remove the GRAs in April 2020. Two new pieces of relevant information, outlined below, since that time reinforce the case for reinstating the GRAs:

- 1. The Monitoring Area is fundamentally flawed.**

The pelagic longline fishery has made zero longline sets in the monitoring area since NOAA Fisheries implemented these measures in 2020. However, we cannot assume that it is due to the Individual Bluefin Quota (IBQ) Program, when multiple other factors are at play. The Oceanic Fish Restoration Project is paying a third of active vessels not to fish during bluefin spawning, the COVID-19 pandemic potentially kept vessels off the water in 2020, and there is an incentive to not fish the monitoring area for three years to remove the gear restricted areas permanently. These declines in fishing activity are consistent with estimates from the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) published in January 2020 that projected reopening the Gulf GRAs could cause up to a 21 percent decrease in fishing revenues. In short, the agency substituted proven GRAs with an untested monitoring program that two years later hasn't provided any monitoring data for decision making.

**2. Western Atlantic bluefin are now undergoing overfishing and require greater protection.**

Under pressure from the U.S. delegation, ICCAT opted to maintain the western Atlantic bluefin tuna quota at 2350 metric tons for 2021, despite warnings from scientists that it would result in a 94 percent chance of overfishing on this already depleted population. That makes ICCAT's mandated protections for Gulf spawning bluefin tuna, and thus the GRAs, that much more critical.

As part of its appropriations legislation for Fiscal Year 2021, Congress called on NOAA Fisheries to "reconsider the decision to open the two GRAs in the Gulf of Mexico," and if they remain open, to "increase monitoring efforts...through 100 percent human observer coverage and by making publicly available all Gulf of Mexico ABFT catch data." NOAA Fisheries' new weekly catch data reporting process addresses part of this request. At a minimum, the agency should be fully scoping a hundred percent monitoring requirement in the context of this request for information. At the same time, information at hand prior and subsequent to the 2020 GRA reopening weigh heavily in favor of the Gulf GRAs. The agency should act accordingly.

In sum, we urge you to take the opportunity afforded by this legislative directive to fully reinstate the April through May prohibition on pelagic longline fishing in the two Gulf of Mexico Gear Restricted Areas. In doing so, NOAA Fisheries would be correcting a decision which will adversely impact both bluefin tuna and the U.S. fishermen who target them.

Sincerely,

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Lee Crockett

cc: The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen; Chair; Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies; Senate Appropriations Committee  
The Honorable Matt Cartwright; Chairman; Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies; House Appropriations Committee  
The Honorable Jerry Moran; Ranking Member; Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies; Senate Appropriations Committee  
The Honorable Robert Aderholt; Ranking Member; Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies; House Appropriations Committee