

# NMFS issues permit for swordfish bycatch in *Illex* squid trawl fishery

GLOUCESTER, MA – *Illex* squid fishermen are now able to retain up to 15 Atlantic swordfish per trip under a new incidental catch permit being issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

NMFS put the new permit in place on Aug. 10 and quickly responded to the immediate influx of industry applications.

Just two weeks later, in fact, Greg DiDomenico, executive director of the Garden State Seafood Association, reported, “The permits have already been received by captains and owners.”

Swordfish bycatch in the *Illex* fishery is nothing new. Swordfish like to eat squid and often travel among squid schools. But squid fishermen’s ability to possess and sell swordfish changed significantly when NMFS’s Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Management Division adopted limited-access permits for HMS species in 1999 and 2000.

Then, fishermen were required to obtain an “HMS permit triple-pack” – a grouping of three limited-access permits, one each to cover swordfish, sharks, and longline-caught Atlantic tunas.

Numerous *Illex* fishermen inevitably did not qualify for the new HMS permits and, so, were forced to discard swordfish.

DiDomenico said, “This was an unnecessary waste of a valuable food resource involving two robust fisheries with a long history of successful coexistence. Clearly a solution was needed that did not negatively impact the swordfish resource.”

The Garden State Seafood Association urged NMFS to resolve the issue, as did NMFS’s HMS Advisory Panel.

The tide really began turning in 2009 when NMFS put out a call seeking “potential regulatory changes that would increase fishing opportunities to harvest the US swordfish quota,” which was underutilized. At that point, NMFS specifically asked for comments on a potential exemption for squid trawl vessels from obtaining triple-pack HMS permits to land incidentally caught swordfish.

NMFS said, “The current permit requirements may be inadvertently contributing to regulatory discards of swordfish.”

## Welcome resolution

Following up on a broad range of suggestions, NMFS published a proposed rule on March 18, 2011 with four alternatives for dealing with the *Illex* fishery’s swordfish bycatch.

One commenter said an incidental catch permit would “provide economic benefits by reducing dead discards of swordfish and converting them into landings.”

The commenter added, “It is painful for so many *Illex* squid trawl vessels to discard incidentally caught dead swordfish just because they do not have the correct HMS permits. The swordfish stock is fully rebuilt, so there is potential for more landings. This would be a great benefit to New Jersey ports, especially Cape May, where many *Illex* vessels unload.”

NMFS said it agreed that the new permit would “lessen economic waste” and positively impact fishing ports in Rhode Island and New Jersey, the two states that historically account for more than 90% of *Illex* squid landings.

Some feared the new permit might create an

incentive for squid boats to target swordfish, but NMFS disagreed.

Current HMS regulations specify that, in order for a vessel to be categorized as a squid trawler, squid needs to make up 75% or more of the total fish onboard and trawl gear can be the only gear onboard.

NMFS also explained that the new incidental permit would apply to *Illex* squid only and not *Loligo*.

“Swordfish discards are approximately 10 times higher in the *Illex* squid trawl fishery,” said the agency. “This is because the *Loligo* fishery primarily operates inshore during summer months whereas the *Illex* fishery operates in the offshore Mid-Atlantic canyons during the summer where swordfish are more prevalent.

For now, squid fishermen seem happy with the 15-fish limit. NMFS increased the swordfish incidental catch limit for squid fishermen from five fish to 15 back in 2007, another move the Garden State

Seafood Association pushed hard for. The problem wasn’t the 15 fish, said the association. It was the fact that only people with HMS triple-pack permits could keep 15 fish.

According to a NMFS analysis, *Illex* fishermen, on average, discard between 1.2-to-3.3 swordfish, sometimes more, sometimes less.

The new permit, which is available to all valid *Illex* squid moratorium permit holders, is officially called the “Incidental HMS Squid Trawl Permit” and is being issued from NMFS’s Northeast Regional Office in Gloucester.

DiDomenico thanked numerous people and organizations, including the HMS AP, Blue Water Fishermen’s Association, the NMFS HMS division, and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, for successfully resolving the issue.

“They all recognized a problem and committed to finding a workable solution that is conservation neutral and has allowed the full utilization of what had been a wasted resource,” he said.

In conclusion, DiDomenico said, “Hopefully, we’ll get a later *Illex* season this year and a few folks will be able to land some nice swordfish.” /cfn/

*The permits have already been received by captains and owners.*

—Greg DiDomenico

## Smoothhound sharks: incidental trawl catch

NMFS’s final swordfish/*Illex* rule also contains a bycatch allowance for smoothhound sharks, better known as smooth dogfish.

Currently, there are no limits on trawl-caught smoothhound sharks, which sometimes show up in Atlantic fisheries for *Loligo* squid, summer flounder, scup, and whiting. But that will soon change because NMFS is incorporating smoothhounds into the HMS management unit, and trawl gear is not an authorized HMS gear.

So, to address the trawl-gear prohibition, the agency is establishing an incidental catch limit. This way, up to 25% of the total weight of fish onboard trawl trips can consist of smoothhounds.

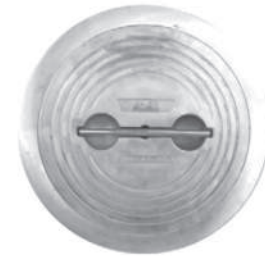
NMFS will publish a notice in the Federal Register once the new incidental catch limit becomes effective. /cfn/

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