

turtles. In recent years NMFS has promoted the development and use of practical and effective seabird and sea turtle management and mitigation measures by longline fishermen. A research program conducted by the Washington Sea Grant Program (WSGP) concluded that paired streamer lines effectively reduced seabird bycatch, compared to a control of no deterrents, by 88–100 percent. Regulatory requirements are being revised to reflect results from this research. This summer, the WSGP embarked on yet another study to test the effectiveness of seabird mitigation measures, this time testing the effectiveness of faster-sinking demersal gear at reducing seabird bycatch. Data are still coming in, but this technology looks very promising both as a seabird deterrent and as a gear that requires less handling on auto-liners. This kind of gear is being collaboratively tested on longliners in New Zealand.

A NMFS study in Hawaii found that blue-dyed bait and weights added to baits reduced the number of black-footed albatross gear interactions by approximately 90 percent. In addition, a highly successful pilot study was recently conducted in Hawaii on an underwater chute-setting device. This study included the Hawaii Longline Association, NMFS, the WPFMC, and the National Audubon Society, Bird Life International's U.S. partner. It found that underwater line-setting effectively reduced seabird bycatch, compared to a control of no deterrents, by 95–100 percent.

In 2002, NMFS implemented permanent seabird-specific mitigation measures (67 FR 34408, May 2002) recommended by the WPFMC to help reduce seabird interactions in the Hawaii-based longline fishery. Along with sea turtle conservation measures (67 FR 40232, June 12, 2002), including a prohibition on shallow setting for all Hawaii longline vessels fishing north of the equator, the seabird mitigation measures (i.e., use of thawed, blue-dyed bait, line setting machine or traditional basket-style longline gear, and strategic discard of offal) north of 23° N. lat., resulted in less than 50 seabird interactions observed in 2002, compared with about 160 interactions in 2001, and nearly 250 interactions in 2000. The reduction in seabird interactions occurred while NMFS was increasing observer coverage levels in the Hawaii longline fishery from 10 percent in 2000 to 23 percent in 2001, and to little more than 25 percent in 2002.

In the North Pacific, NMFS collaborated with Washington Sea Grant Program for the 2002 bycatch avoidance

workshops for commercial longliners in Alaska ports. The NPFMC is changing existing regulations for seabird avoidance measures required in the groundfish and halibut hook-and-line fisheries off Alaska, and NMFS is promoting the USFWS free streamer line program in Alaska.

Also, in 2002 NMFS added seabird bycatch issue to agendas of several bilateral fisheries meetings to highlight the issue and promote and encourage implementation of FAO's IPOA-Seabirds. NMFS has placed or supported the placement of seabird bycatch on the agenda of the meetings of several international organizations (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), and ICCAT). NMFS has also formed a bycatch reduction task force that will be seeking ways to address the issue of seabird issues in the international arena.

NMFS is also working to implement Executive Order 13186, signed by the President on January 10, 2001 (66 FR 3853), on the responsibilities of Federal agencies to protect migratory birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and other laws. NMFS, in cooperation with USFWS, is drafting a Memorandum of Understanding to identify strategies that promote conservation of migratory birds through enhanced collaboration between NMFS and USFWS, in coordination with state, territorial, tribal, and local governments.

G. International Activities to Reduce Bycatch

For several years NMFS has been engaged in ongoing activities, on a bilateral basis and through regional fisheries management organizations, seeking international bycatch assessment and bycatch reduction. Annual reports to Congress assessing the need for international bycatch agreements required by section 202(h) of the MSA have been made since 1996. In addition, an International Bycatch Reduction Task Force has been created whose activities are included in the most recent 202(h) report to Congress.

1. Activities Pursuant to Sec. 202(h) of the MSA

Section 202(h)(1) of the MSA directs the Secretary of State, in cooperation with NMFS, to secure international agreements to establish standards and measures for bycatch reduction that are comparable to the standards and measures applicable to U.S. fishermen. Section 202(h)(3) of the MSA requires NMFS, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to submit an annual

report to Congress describing actions taken regarding potential international bycatch agreements pursuant to Section 202(h)(1) of the Act.

NMFS reviews management measures under all approved and implemented FMPs that address fish stocks also harvested by foreign fishermen to identify relevant bycatch standards and measures. In the report covering the period September 2000–December 2001, NMFS concluded, and the Department of State concurred, that pursuing international bycatch agreements pursuant to Section 202(h) of the MSA continued to be necessary and appropriate to address sea turtle bycatch in longline fisheries in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As a result, an international strategy, referred to as the Course of Action to Promote International Agreements that Address the Need to Reduce Sea Turtle Bycatch in Foreign Longline Fisheries, was developed to address this issue.

2. International Bycatch Reduction Task Force

In January 2002, NMFS convened an International Bycatch Reduction Task Force made up of NMFS and U.S. Department of State representatives. A Plan of Action was subsequently developed by the Task Force to: (1) implement the strategy to promote international agreements that reduce sea turtle and seabird bycatch in foreign longline fisheries; and (2) promote the implementation of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) International Plan of Action (IPOA) for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries and the FAO IPOA for the Conservation and Management of Sharks.

The Task Force Plan of Action outlines steps to be taken in implementing the U.S. strategy for international bycatch reduction. These tasks are broken up into two categories: international sea turtle workshops, and international communications relating to sea turtles, sharks and seabirds.

a. International Sea Turtle Workshops. The Task Force has engaged in a number of activities in support of international sea turtle workshops during 2002. A steering committee has been formed to guide the planning and execution of a NMFS-sponsored international technical workshop on sea turtle bycatch in longline fisheries during February 2003. This workshop: examined global and seasonal fleet distributions and effort; compared gear different configurations; looked at target species; compared existing regulatory regimes; and reviewed on-going bycatch reduction research. Diplomatic