

avoided”), and these seven objectives are broken down into 22 individual strategies consisting of 69 individual, substantive components. The plan also listed a series of regional recommendations. NMFS has undertaken many activities in support of these objectives and strategies, and continues to build on progress already made.

NMFS has determined, due to the continuing challenge of meeting the NMFS national bycatch goal, that we will undertake a comprehensive review of agency progress toward meeting the national bycatch goal, its supporting objectives and strategies, and the regional recommendations. This review will be part of the National Bycatch Strategy, which is comprised of the following six components:

1. Assess progress toward meeting the national bycatch goal, its supporting objectives and strategies, and regional recommendations (as set forth in *Managing the Nation's Bycatch*), which includes meeting the bycatch reduction requirements of relevant statutes, including national standard 9 of the MSA, Section 118 of the MMPA, and the take prohibitions of the ESA.

2. Develop a national approach to a standardized bycatch reporting methodology.

3. Implement the national bycatch goal through regional implementation plans.

4. Undertake education and outreach involving cooperative efforts, at the regional level (and other levels as appropriate), by fishery managers, scientists, fishermen, and other stakeholders to develop effective and efficient methods for reducing bycatch.

5. Utilize existing partnerships and develop new international approaches to reducing bycatch of living marine resources including fish stocks, sea turtles, marine mammals, and migratory birds, where appropriate.

6. Identify new funding requirements to effectively support the NMFS National Bycatch Strategy on an ongoing basis.

The first component of the National Bycatch Strategy will involve a headquarters-based team, along with an Atlantic HMS team and regional teams consisting of representatives from NMFS regional offices and science centers, in consultation with RFMCs, and will result in the preparation of “regional report cards” by July 2003: (1) documenting progress toward meeting the national goal, objectives, strategies, and regional recommendations; (2) suggesting ways to enhance compliance with existing bycatch mandates under the MSA (e.g., national standard 9) and

Section 118 of the MMPA; (3) suggesting ways to enhance compliance with the take prohibitions of the ESA and to reduce takes of migratory birds; (4) recommending ways to strengthen the national bycatch goal, objectives, strategies, and regional recommendations to ensure adequate consideration of protected species and address any deficiencies that are identified; (5) listing related bycatch management gaps by priority of funding needs; and (6) recommending updates to the goal, objectives, strategies, and regional recommendations of the 1998 report, as appropriate.

The second component of the National Bycatch Strategy will be the development of a national approach to standardized bycatch reporting methodology for all U.S. commercial and recreational fisheries. The MSA currently requires that this be specified on a fishery-by-fishery basis, but fishery interactions and the deployment of observers and other data collection systems across fisheries indicate the need for a coordinated approach. A national in-house working group will be convened to evaluate the current methodologies for estimating bycatch, review the current use of self-reporting to estimate discards, evaluate the potential for estimating discards by inferences drawn from fishery independent surveys, recommend a statistical design for observer programs to cover all U.S. fisheries, recommend standards of precision to be achieved for discard estimates, and recommend observer sample sizes and associated costs for all U.S. fisheries. The working group will submit a final report to the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries by June 2003.

The third component of the National Bycatch Strategy, based on the assessment from the first and second components, will be the production by regional teams of regional and Atlantic HMS implementation plans and timelines that are developed in concert with national policy and guidance on bycatch. These plans should reflect any updating of the goal, objectives, and strategies of the 1998 report. The timing of the actual implementation of these plans will vary, depending on rulemaking schedules as well as resources, but will all be submitted to the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries by September 2003. The plans will include criteria for identifying “vulnerability” of discard species to adverse impacts; application of those criteria to identify the most serious discard problems; identification and evaluation of alternatives for reducing the adverse impacts of discards

(including at least the reduction or elimination of overfishing target species, modification of fishing gear and/or fishing practices, time and/or area restrictions on fishing, and factors that determine the likelihood of success using each of the alternatives); and strategies for solving the problems that have been identified.

The fourth component of the National Bycatch Strategy will result, by September 2003, in the creation of a plan for expanding education and outreach activities involving the establishment of, coordination, and communications among regional working groups that specialize in fishery-specific bycatch issues. These regional groups may ultimately include regional marine advisory officers and others who work closely with fishermen. The purpose of these groups will be to formulate fishery-specific, effective, and efficient methods for cooperatively reducing bycatch. These methods could include incentive programs and/or other programs to encourage fishermen to reduce bycatch and assist in providing accurate estimates of bycatch. Incentives might include allocations of fish or extended fishing times to fishermen who voluntarily use specialized gear and fishing tactics to successfully reduce bycatch. Education and outreach will be an element of every regional plan developed in the third component. This effort will include sponsorship of symposia (including a major international bycatch symposium at the American Fishery Society's 2003 annual meeting), workshops, and other bycatch education and outreach activities. In addition, this effort will include updating and enhancing the dedicated NMFS bycatch website (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/bycatch.htm>) on a regular basis.

The fifth component of the National Bycatch Strategy will address international approaches to reduce bycatch of living marine resources, including fish stocks, sea turtles, marine mammals, and migratory birds extending beyond U.S. waters. Existing international agreements will be examined for potential broadening and for progress in implementation. RFMOs and other fora will also be examined for effectiveness in resolving regional bycatch problems and as alternative fora for yielding more expedient results. NMFS will continue to report to Congress annually with an assessment of the need for international bycatch agreements, as required by section 202(h) of the MSA. Continuing activities will include seeking bycatch assessment and reduction on a bilateral basis and