MEMORANDUM:

TO: Louis Daniel

FROM: Randy Gregory

DATE: October 7, 2010

SUBJECT: Bluefin Tuna and Delayed Menhaden Harvest

Since September 30th, your office has received six requests asking for the harvest of menhaden off the N.C. coast be delayed until after the bluefin tuna season closed (after January 31). Proclamation M-33-2009 (Atlantic Menhaden – Purse Seines: Atlantic Ocean) restricts the harvest of Atlantic menhaden and Atlantic thread fin herring with purse seines in NC waters. Here is a summary of the restrictions:

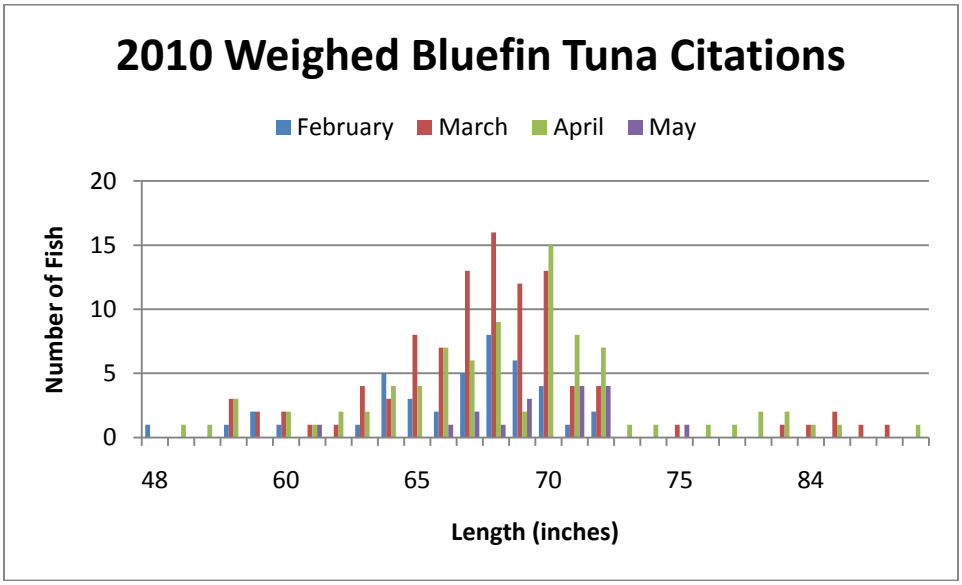
- Fishery is closed in NC waters from Cape Lookout to Cape Fear
- January 1 to April 31 the fishery may not operate within 1 nautical mile of the beach north of Cape Lookout
- May 1 to September 30 the fishery may not operate within 1.5 nautical miles of the beach north of Cape Lookout
- October 1 to December 31 the fishery may not operate within 0.5 nautical miles of the beach north of Cape Lookout

I spoke with Joseph Smith, NMFS menhaden biologist, to get an idea of the current activities of the menhaden purse seine fishery in NC Ocean waters during December through April when bluefin tuna are most commonly off our coast and available to our commercial and recreational fishermen. In the last three years (2007 to 2009), seiners from Omega Protein have only made sets on five days in December (2007 – two days and 2008 – three days) and all of these sets were north of Wimble Shoals and occurred no later than December 11th. The fishery usually ends in early December and does not resume until May. Here is some of the other information he provided about the purse seine fishery:

- Purse seiners must be out of Chesapeake Bay the 3rd Friday in November
- Can fish in VA waters until Friday before Christmas
- Fishery reopens the 1st Monday of May in VA including Chesapeake Bay
- NC November fishery mostly occurs Oregon Inlet north or occasionally during nice weather windows to Cape Hatteras and as far south as Drum Inlet (seiners don't like to be near Capes in rough weather because weight shifts can sink loaded menhaden boats)
- December fishery usually occurs from Cape Henry to VA/NC border with a few trips south to Oregon Inlet

The NC commercial bluefin tuna landings peak in December and January when General Category is open and the tuna migrate into NC waters. Average monthly NC bluefin tuna landings from 2005 to 2009 were 88,899 lbs for December and 55,131 lbs for January (sub-quotas, daily bag limits and restricted fishing days set by NMFS have some effect on our landings). This past winter the bluefin tuna (large medium/giant >73 inches) available for the General Category off NC were not as abundant and landings in December 2009 (48,281 lbs) and

January 2010 (7,577 lbs) were significantly lower than the previous five year average. However, the recreational fishery enjoyed excellent fishing after the General Category season closed and this was reflected in our Citation Program numbers mainly in the Hatteras and Oregon Inlet areas. In the first half of 2010, 1,562 citations (landed (weighed) and released) were awarded for recreationally caught bluefin tuna. Citations for bluefin tuna have averaged only a few hundred per year for the past five years. This incredible increase in citations occurred mainly in March and April. Most of this year's weighed bluefin tuna (1/3 of the total citations were landed (weighed)) were in the 65" to 70" inch range (160 lbs to 220 lbs). These fish will probably be available to the commercial fishery this winter as they approach and exceed the 73 inch commercial minimum. NMFS Highly Migratory Species Division biologists have been tracking these two strong year classes in the coast wide recreational fishery for the last few years.



Bluefin tuna rely heavily on Atlantic menhaden as forage while off our coast in the winter. A bluefin tuna diet study recently published by a NCSU/CMAST graduate student (Butler et al.: Feeding ecology of *Thunnus thynnus* in North Carolina) showed Atlantic menhaden composed 80% to 90% of the stomach content from tuna collected from the winter General Category fishery in NC. The current stock status for Atlantic menhaden is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring (ASMFC 2010).

cc: Catherine Blum
David Taylor
Trish Murphey