

The Dispatch (Ocean City, MD)

NMFS Study Finds White Marlin Not Endangered

Stock Overfished But Not In Peril

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OCEAN CITY – Stating the white marlin population appears stable or is even increasing “for the foreseeable future,” the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) late last month issued a report concluding an endangered or threatened listing for the species is not warranted at this time.

The resort’s recreational fishing community breathed a collective sigh of relief this week when the NMFS conclusions about the status of the white marlin were officially published in the Federal Register. The glamour fish in the “White Marlin Capital of the World” is at the center of a billion dollar sportfishing industry locally and up and down the East Coast and an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing for the white marlin could have cause irreparable harm to the day in, day out fishing activity off the coast and the big-time offshore tournaments each summer including the annual White Marlin Open.

NMFS’ Biological Review Team (BRT) spent the last several months carefully reviewing white marlin stock assessments and the real and perceived threats to their existence. The BRT considered the effects of the recreational and commercial activity both in U.S. waters and throughout the Atlantic by other less conservation-minded nations and determined although it appears the species continues to be over-fished, the recently completed stock assessment does not warrant an endangered or threatened listing for the white marlin.

“The team concludes white marlin are not threatened,” the report reads. “Within the foreseeable future (10-15 years) throughout all its range, the stock of white marlin is expected to remain stable or increase given management requirements.”

The news was met with joy among many in the local sportfishing community including White Marlin Open founder and director Jim Motsko, who said this week he was closely monitoring stock assessment results and anxiously awaiting the final ESA determination.

“Needless to say, we’re very happy,” he said. “From talking to different people, the indications were there was some decline in the numbers, but not enough to warrant an ESA listing. You never know what to expect and I still wasn’t certain until it was officially listed in the Federal Register.”

Motsko said an ESA listing for white marlin could have been devastating not only for the White Marlin Open and other tournaments, but for the recreational sportfishing industry locally as well. An ESA listing for white marlin likely would have kept recreational and commercial anglers out of areas the species is known to frequent and could have impacted other targeted species.

“I feel like we dodged another bullet,” he said. “A listing could have been catastrophic to the sportfishing industry, but this ruling puts it to rest, at least for a while.”

The Biological Review Team considered a variety of factors, both domestic and international and recreational and commercial, while debating an ESA listing for the white marlin. In the end, the team decided an ESA listing wasn’t warranted.

“The BRT established and adapted listing thresholds for white marlin and deliberated to determine if white marlin met standards for either threatened or endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range,” the report reads. “Based on the best available information, the BRT determined that neither the threatened or endangered metric was met.”

Just how long the white marlin is safe from a potential ESA listing remains in doubt. The NMFS report suggests the species still appears to be over-fished and calls for another stock assessment as soon as 2010.

The most recent stock assessment and potential listing for white marlin was set in motion by a series of events over the last few years. In 2002, when NMFS decided not to impose an ESA listing on white marlin at the completion of its last stock assessment for the species, two conservation groups – the **Center for Biological Diversity** and the Turtle Island

Restoration Network – filed suit against the federal agency for failing to do so.

In February 2005, the lawsuit was settled with compromises made on both sides. The conservation groups agreed to drop their effort, at least for the time being, to have the white marlin listed as threatened or endangered. NMFS, meanwhile, agreed to move up the timetable for its next stock assessment for white marlin and also agreed to explore ways to keep long-liners out of the hot spots.

As part of the settlement, NMFS agreed to begin a new ESA status review for white marlin within 18 months of the completion of the new stock assessment, or no later than Dec. 31, 2007. NMFS final report was completed on Dec. 26 and it was officially reported in the Federal Register this week.

While the white marlin is safe from an endangered or threatened listing for the time being, stringent regulations are in place to help ensure the species remains off the ESA list. For example, as of Jan. 1, circle hooks are not mandatory for tournament anglers targeting white marlin. The regulation was supposed to start last January but was put off for a year to allow anglers and captains to adjust to the change.