

White marlin may see protected species status

## Groups argue for protection

Posted by the [Asbury Park Press](#) on 12/26/06

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White marlin, the speedy billfish that inspire New Jersey sportsmen to invest tens of millions of dollars every year in boats and tournaments, will come under a fresh examination by federal officials to see whether they should be considered for threatened or endangered species status.

Two environmental groups that sought endangered species status for Atlantic white marlin a few years ago didn't get that ruling from the National Marine Fisheries Service. But last year, a federal judge approved a settlement to a subsequent lawsuit that included a reconsideration by NMFS.

That review was set in motion Thursday with a notice in the Federal Register, according to spokesmen for [the Center for Biological Diversity](#) and the Turtle Island Restoration Network, the two West Coast-based organizations that brought the lawsuit against NMFS in 2004.

Both groups have long pressed the government to restrict longline fishing operations because of bycatch, the accidental taking of other fish and animals on hooks intended for swordfish and tuna.

Over the past few years, the commercial fishing industry and NMFS responded by introducing circle hooks, which are less likely to be ingested by sea turtles, and by closing some areas to fishing when high numbers of turtles are transiting those waters.

The two groups contend white marlin still are caught in excessive numbers, while fishermen argue conservation measures in American waters and recreational catch-and-release fishing reduced the toll.

The original endangered species petition was resisted by both commercial and recreational groups on the East Coast, where white marlin inspire anglers to mount major fishing tournaments out of ports like Cape May and Ocean City, Md.

It's taken more than a year for NMFS to start its review because, under terms of the court settlement, the agency was awaiting an annual report from the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which also reviews the status of high seas billfish species.

The commission met last month in Croatia, and its report on white marlin did not have any surprises, said [Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity](#).

The commission says the marlin decline is not as bad as once thought but that overfishing continues, [Cummings said](#).

Now there's a public comment period until Feb. 20 before NMFS begins its assessment process, which must be completed by the end of 2007.

If the agency decides white marlin should be listed under the Endangered Species Act, that process would extend through 2008, he said.

The groups' main goal is to stop longline bycatch and have the government protect known marlin spawning areas, [Cummings said](#).

"Our goal is by no means to shut down recreational fishing," he added. "We want to stop the taking of white marlin by industrial fishing."