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White marlin may get oversight

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The federal government has started a process that could put one of the Florida Keys' most sought-after sport fish on the protected species list.

The National Marine Fisheries Service on Thursday announced it has begun a review process to determine whether the white marlin should be placed on the federal Endangered Species List. The agency will solicit public comment for the next 60 days.

To comment on a proposal to protect white marlin, contact the National Marine Fisheries Service at whitemarlin.info@noaa.gov.

The agency has a year to complete the review. If the agency rules that white marlin should be protected, fishery managers will determine whether the species should be listed as endangered or threatened, a classification that carries fewer restrictions.

The review is part of the settlement in a lawsuit [the Center for Biological Diversity](#) and Turtle Island Restoration Network filed against the government to raise awareness about the dangers of long-line fishing. The group claims that long-line fishing kills migratory billfish and other species of fish and animals.

"Our goal is not to ban sport fishing," said [Brendan Cummings, a project coordinator with the Center for Biological Diversity](#). "We want to protect spawning areas from long-line fishing."

In January 2004, the two environmental groups filed a lawsuit against the National Marine Fisheries Service challenging the agency's rejection of a petition to protect the white marlin under the Endangered Species Act. The agency did so despite the findings of its own scientists, who said current harvest levels were unsustainable. Even under the most optimistic management scenarios, the species would continue to decline to dangerously low levels, Cummings said.

In October 2005, a federal judge approved a settlement requiring the National Marine Fisheries Service to revisit if the white marlin warrants the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

White marlin, a top predator, are known to reach a weight of 150 pounds, and they feed on jacks, small dolphin fish, sardines and other fish that swim near the surface. The population has stayed stable in the Keys, according to one sport fisherman.

"If a fisherman catches three in a season, he is usually the top angler," Islamorada charter boat Capt. Steve Leopold said. "We are catching the same number of them as we always have."

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