

September 14, 2011

Pat Kurkul
Regional Administrator
National Marine Fisheries Service
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930



Dear Ms. Kurkul:

Shark Advocates International and Project Aware Foundation appreciate this opportunity to comment on the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposed emergency action to raise the current catch limit for Northeast skates by 56% (from 31 to 48 million pounds). Given the short duration (15 days) of this comment period, we offer only a brief response.

Whereas we appreciate that this proposal is not out of line with scientific advice and that accountability measures are in place, we are deeply concerned about what we find to be misaligned priorities and a tendency to err on the side of maximizing economic gain from skate fishing rather than on conservation of these exceptionally vulnerable species.

Of greatest concern is the lack of consideration for the effect of this quota increase and associated risk-prone measures on the population of thorny skate (*Amblyraja radiata*), which, although a prohibited species, is taken as bycatch in fisheries that land other species of skates and other demersal fish. Thorny skates are classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Critically Endangered off New England. This species, as you know, is also the subject of two, recently filed petitions for listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Given the severity of the regional decline in thorny skates and the failure of the 2004 retention prohibition to result in any appreciable rebuilding, we feel strongly that NMFS should treat thorny skate recovery rather than skate fishing maximization as the number one priority for regional skate management.

As you know, most skates, like most sharks, are particularly susceptible to overfishing due to life history characteristics such as slow growth and few young. In this way, they represent the ultimate case for taking a precautionary approach to allowable fishing. The proposed action, in our opinion, would reflect the opposite approach, posing additional risks to an already threatened population.

For these reasons, we join the American Elasmobranch Society, the foremost association of shark and rays scientists, in opposing the proposed emergency skate quota increase and urging NMFS to focus instead on obligations for ensuring the recovery of thorny skates.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sonja V. Fordham".

Sonja V. Fordham
President
Shark Advocates International

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenny Miller Garmendia".

Jenny Miller Garmendia
Executive Director
Project AWARE Foundation