

BLUEFIN TUNA, BILLFISH, SWORDFISH, AND SHARK — Recreational Reporting

What is being considered?

The Department would like to make it easier for recreational anglers to comply with the catch card census program's reporting and tag requirements. The Department is considering the following changes:

- switching from paper to electronic catch cards;
- eliminating tags; and
- requiring all releases, both live and dead, to be reported.

Why is this change necessary?

The National Marine Fisheries Service requires all recreational anglers to report bluefin tuna, billfishes, and swordfish. Additionally, all landed sharks (except spiny dogfish) are required to be reported in Maryland. To fulfill this requirement, the National Marine Fisheries Service works with the Department by providing technical support and funding to implement a catch card census program.

Anglers are required to complete a catch card when they return to port for each bluefin tuna, billfish, swordfish, or shark on board the vessel. The angler returns the catch card to a reporting station and a tag is provided for each completed catch card. The angler is required to place this tag around the tail of the fish before removing it from the vessel. Trailered boats cannot be pulled from the water until the tag is in place. Shore-based shark anglers must turn in the catch card and tag the shark prior to moving it from the point of landing.

Catch cards are available from the Department's website, reporting stations, and kiosks. Tags can only be obtained by exchanging the completed catch card at an open reporting station. When reporting stations are closed, anglers must use a self-serve kiosk. Anglers must complete the catch card and the attached receipt. The angler retains the receipt, which replaces the tag, and deposits the catch card into the locked box at the kiosk. This is inconsistent with the current regulatory requirement, but is necessary for reporting purposes. Making the change from paper to electronic reporting in regulation will allow for easy, timely reporting while eliminating the need for plastic tags and reducing reporting redundancy for charter/headboats.

The requirement for shore-based anglers to tag the shark prior to moving it from the point of landing creates many issues for anglers. The drive to the nearest reporting station or self-serve kiosk can be long and burdensome, requiring all gear to be put away, airing up tires, finding someone to attend to their catch, and on busy park days, possibly not being allowed back on the beach until capacity allows. Allowing shore-based anglers to electronically report will make it easier for anglers while eliminating the need for plastic tags.

Electronic reporting is anticipated to improve compliance because it will be easier than going to a reporting station to exchange a catch card for a tag. It will also eliminate the need for some vessels to make a stop at a reporting station prior to proceeding to their private dock or pulling their vessel from the water.

Eliminating plastic tags has environmental and financial advantages. It would be beneficial to the environment as the manufacturing, delivery, disposal processes would not be needed. Improperly disposed of used tags would no longer be found in the coastal environment. Additionally, there is a financial savings in both cost and in staff time spent on accounting.

The Department is considering adding the requirement to report all releases, live and dead. This would be consistent with NOAA Fisheries reporting requirements for HMS permit holders. NOAA Fisheries is required to report this information to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Currently, this information is only obtained when anglers report landing a species required to have a catch card.

Who will this affect?

Recreational anglers who fish for bluefin tuna, billfish, swordfish, or sharks.

When would this be effective?

The Department projects that this change could be effective in the Summer of 2024. However, the exact date cannot be determined. The Department will follow our normal proposal procedures if this concept moves forward.

Has this change been discussed with stakeholders?

The current process and need for simplifying the process was discussed at the Coastal Recreational Fisheries Forum in April 2023. Changes were previously scoped in 2021, discussed with the Coastal Forums in September 2020, and the Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission and Tidal Fisheries Advisory Commission at their October 2020 meetings. This need for electronic reporting has been mentioned at NOAA Fisheries Highly Migratory Species Advisory Committee meetings.