

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES - Elimination of the Catch Card Census Program

What is being considered?

The Department would like to eliminate the catch card census program. The catch card census program is a reporting and tagging program that was developed to fulfill federal reporting requirements. Eliminating the program would remove State reporting and tagging requirements for bluefin tuna, white marlin, blue marlin, roundscale spearfish, sailfish, swordfish, and sharks and transition Highly Migratory Species (HMS) permit holders to federal reporting options.

Specifically, the Department would remove the following requirement:

Before removing a landed billfish, bluefin tuna, swordfish, or shark caught for recreational purposes from a boat or removing a boat containing one of those species from the water, a person shall:

- (1) Immediately report to a reporting station designated by the Department;
- (2) Complete a catch information form provided by the reporting station; and
- (3) Affix a tail tag, provided by the reporting station, to the species.

Why is this change necessary?

Eliminating the catch card census program and transitioning HMS permit holders to federal reporting options is anticipated to:

- Improve compliance because anglers will have electronic options making it easier than going to a reporting station to exchange a catch card for a tag.
- 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.
- Eliminate duplicate reporting at HMS Tournaments.
- Eliminate plastic tags.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries requires all recreational anglers to report bluefin tuna, billfishes, and swordfish. To fulfill this requirement, NOAA Fisheries has worked with the Department by providing technical support and funding to implement a catch card census program. Additionally, all landed sharks (except spiny dogfish) have been required to be reported in Maryland.

Anglers are currently 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.

Removing the catch card reporting and tagging requirement in regulation will allow for easy, timely reporting per conditions of the vessel owners' federally issued HMS permit while eliminating the need for plastic tags and reducing reporting redundancy for charter/headboats. NOAA Fisheries will require HMS permittees to follow federal reporting procedures if the catch card census program is removed. This change would also provide consistency with NOAA Fisheries requirements for HMS permit holders to report all releases, live and dead. 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 in Maryland when anglers report landing a species required to have a catch card.

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. Shark landings have significantly declined over the past few years. Although the shark data obtained from catch cards provided useful information, there are no longer enough reports to warrant the continuation of this reporting requirement as an independent State program if the remaining species are being moved to the federal reporting program. Removing the State shark reporting and tagging requirements will make it easier for anglers to harvest sharks, eliminate the need for plastic tags, and provide consistency with neighboring states and federal waters.

Eliminating the catch card census program and transitioning HMS permit holders to federal reporting options is anticipated to improve compliance because anglers will have electronic options making it 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. All HMS Tournament operators are required to report catches to NOAA Fisheries, so removal of the program will eliminate duplicate reporting at HMS Tournaments.

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.

Definitions

"Billfish" means the following species:

- (1) Atlantic Blue Marlin (*Makaira nigricans*);
- (2) Atlantic White Marlin (*Kajikia albidus*);
- (3) Atlantic Sailfish (*Istiophorus platypterus*); and
- (4) Roundscale Spearfish (*Tetrapturus georgii*)

"Sharks" includes the following species: Smoothhound, Atlantic sharpnose, Bonnethead, Finetooth, Blacknose, Tiger, Blacktip, Spinner, Bull, Lemon, Nurse, Shortfin mako, Porbeagle, Common thresher, Oceanic whitetip, Blue, Scalloped hammerhead, Great hammerhead, and Smooth hammerhead

Current Regulations for Highly Migratory Species

Bluefin Tuna [COMAR 08.02.05.23](#)

Billfish [COMAR 08.02.05.26](#)

Sharks (Recreational Rules) [COMAR 08.02.22.02](#)

Swordfish [COMAR 08.02.05.27](#)

Who will this affect?

Anyone who fishes recreationally for bluefin tuna, billfish, swordfish, or sharks. This affects individual anglers, anglers fishing from shore, anglers fishing from a vessel (personal and charters), and anglers fishing in tournaments.

When would this be effective?

The Department projects that this change could be effective January 1, 2026. However, the exact date cannot be determined. The Department will follow our normal [procedures](#) if this concept moves forward.

Has this change been discussed with advisory bodies?

This idea was scoped with the Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission and the Tidal Fisheries Advisory Commission at their meetings in January 2025.