

Protocol - Recreational Billfish Survey

(updated: May 10, 2013)

The Southeast Fisheries Science Center has conducted the Recreational Billfish Survey (RBS) in the Gulf of Mexico continuously since 1970, expanding it to include the western North Atlantic in 1984. A primary purpose of the program is to obtain estimates of U.S. recreational catch and population abundance trends for use in stock assessment models for blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish and swordfish in the Atlantic Ocean. Much U.S. recreational fishing effort for Atlantic marlin is concentrated at tournaments, and, as estimates obtained from more comprehensive surveys have often been unstable for these rare event catches, the RBS is currently used to estimate U.S. recreational catch and fishing effort (Note: this approach may be reconsidered in the future). The sailfish and swordfish recreational fisheries are more diverse and, therefore, the RBS alone clearly does not provide a robust estimate for their respective fisheries without additional recreational data sources.

Data for the RBS are collected from organized recreational billfish tournaments that take place along the U.S. Atlantic coast, Gulf of Mexico, U.S. territories in the Caribbean (U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico) and the Bahamas. Data from the Bahamas are included because virtually all of the participants in Bahamian billfish tournaments are U.S. citizens using U.S. flagged vessels. Few data from non-tournament sources are included in the RBS, although some non-tournament data, such as dock samples of billfish not caught during a tournament, are normally incorporated each year.

A billfish tournament is defined as any organized fishing event for which there is a reward category for billfish. Rewards can be points, plaques, prizes, money or other awards. Federal regulations require that each billfish tournament director submit the following information to the RBS at least one month before the tournament takes place: 1) tournament name, 2) tournament location, 3) fishing dates and, 4) the name, telephone number and email address of the tournament director. Within one week after the event takes place, billfish tournament organizers are required to submit a summary of the tournament's fishing results on the Atlantic Highly

Migratory Species Tournament Summary Form (currently, OMB #0648-0323, attached). For each species caught, the tournament director of record must provide the RBS with, 1) the number boated, 2) the number tagged and released, 3) the number released without a tag and, 4) the number released dead, such as undersized or otherwise disqualified fish that died during the capture process. Often these fish are disposed of offshore. Directors are requested to include this information in their summary reports as documented billfish mortalities. Data collected by the survey also includes the number of boats in each tournament and the tournament's hours of fishing.

While tournaments covered by the RBS target blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish or swordfish , data on other highly migratory species such as roundscale spearfish, longbill spearfish, tunas, king mackerel, wahoo and dolphin are also submitted on a voluntary basis by billfish tournament directors and kept in the RBS database.

Due to the topography of the continental shelf in Gulf of Mexico, the billfish fishery in the Gulf takes place many miles offshore, where radio contact is not always possible. As a result, tournament operators are unable to track hook-ups or record catch unless the boats return to the official tournament marina at the end of the fishing day and voluntarily report their fishing results. The RBS stations dock samplers at more than 30% of the larger billfish tournaments in the Gulf of Mexico in order to interview, collect and verify catch and effort information from each boat as they return from the day's fishing.

Quality control of all incoming tournament data summaries is an ongoing effort requiring continuous communication with tournament directors and, when necessary, individual anglers in order to investigate suspect submissions, collect missing measurements, clarify illegible entries, or verify unusual catch rates.