

VIKING VILLAGE FISHERMEN'S PUBLIC COMMENTS ON THE ATLANTIC LARGE WHALE SCOPING DOCUMENT

July 29, 2011 from 6p-9p at the Stafford Township Municipal Building Council Meeting Room, 260 Bay Ave, Manahawkin, NJ

Please accept these comments on the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan 2011 Scoping Meetings for the Development of Vertical Lines on behalf of the Viking Village Commercial Dock and our NJ fishermen. The Viking Village Dock, located in Barnegat Light, N.J. provides shore side support services to its members who are involved in numerous East Coast fisheries including but not limited to monkfish, bluefish, croaker, spiny dogfish, tilefish, scallops, and highly migratory species. Many of these fisheries require the use of vertical lines so we have much at stake. Several of our fishermen and our representatives also serve on Take Reduction Teams for bottlenose dolphin & harbor porpoise as well as large whales.

We appreciate the opportunity to convey our thoughts directly to NMFS staff regarding the 5 questions included in the scoping document.

Question #1 & Question #2: Where and When to Manage?

Our position on both these questions, whether it is about whales, dolphins or harbor porpoise, has always been that we should manage to address hotspots. We have always been upfront about problem areas and have even proposed expanding the amount of time a particular area should be closed where we knew there were concerns such as in the harbor porpoise plan where we recommended and supported expanding the timing of the Mud Hole closure.

Regarding large whales, we do not see that we have a serious problem with our vertical line gear entangling whales. And it seems to us the data supports our position that the Mid-Atlantic is an area that poses less risk to whales from fishing interactions.

We are concerned that the Agency might be considering measures for our region when relatively little whale sampling has actually been done in our area.

While we do see some whales off our coast we have relatively few fishermen setting far less gear (and less vertical lines) compared to other regions. There is no doubt the concentration of vertical lines and fishing effort in the Mid-Atlantic is very small. The Agency must take this information into consideration when determining what has to be done.

Consistent with our position of addressing hot spots -- we recommend that any management measures that become necessary be implemented in a limited area and on a seasonal basis.

Question #3: How to Manage?

We have a practical problem we cannot get away from – we need the buoys on the ends of our lines. We need them to locate our gear, to warn other set gear fishermen that the area is already being fished, and to advertise where our gear is so that mobile gear fishermen do not tow through our sets, costing us thousands of dollars. We also see our buoys being cut on a regular basis by poorly behaved sport fishermen leaving us with fewer buoys to locate our gear.

For several reasons, reducing the number of end lines in our stationary gear fisheries is just not a practical solution for our fishermen.

Unfortunately, we do not know of a gear modification that is currently available and feasible for widespread use that would help us reduce the number of vertical lines in the water.

In place of management actions to reduce the numbers of vertical lines in our fisheries we can support improvements in gear marking and reporting.

Question #4: How can we improve the current gear marking strategy?

We currently mark our gillnet gear with ID tags, our vertical lines have a 4 inch color mark midway up, and our buoys also have identification. We use color tape to make our 4 inch marks and this has proven to be effective and affordable.

We do understand that a single color tape mark halfway up the buoy line is not sufficient for the agency to do its job. Therefore, we are willing to work with the agency to devise a more effective marking strategy.

We could consider increasing the number of color marks up the buoy line. Perhaps one solution might be to consider 2 color tape marks approximately $1/3$ and $2/3^{\text{rds}}$ up the buoy line, or 3 color tape marks at each $1/4$ distance.

We must also keep in mind that while we can conceptually support some form of increased marking we must be careful how the requirement is defined in the plan. We must not increase enforcement problems by requiring a point-specific distance between the marks so we find USCG and NMFS OLE on our boats with tape measures issuing citations for color marks off by a few feet.

We support using a color scheme that denotes the Large Whale management areas but we could also consider a State and/or fishery-specific color scheme (possibly synchronized with buoy color). Here again, we are willing to work with NMFS staff to devise the best possible marking system.

Question #5: How can we improve gear characterization reporting?

We support accurate effort and vertical line data being used in the model. For fisheries where there is no observer coverage we recommend a survey approach that can be implemented through our Garden State Seafood Association working with our NJ State officials. Survey forms can be mailed directly to various permit holders and our association can work to see that they are completed and returned.

For our gillnet fisheries, we carry more than our share of observer coverage. In fact, our port has been used in the past by NMFS as a training facility for new observers. We do not understand how all of our observed trips do not allow for the collection of the necessary information to properly characterize our fisheries. Maybe making changes to the observer forms may be the best way to address the information gap.

On behalf of Viking Village Dock and our fishermen, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the scoping document for the Atlantic Large Whale Plan.