

2020 Deepwater Horizon Oceanic Fish Restoration Project

SUPPORTING A HEALTHIER GULF OF MEXICO



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

PROJECT BACKGROUND

What is the Deepwater Horizon Oceanic Fish Restoration Project?

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) are working with the pelagic longline fishery in the Gulf of Mexico, which targets species such as yellowfin tuna and swordfish, to implement the *Deepwater Horizon* Oceanic Fish Restoration Project.

This project includes a temporary and voluntary repose — a six-month period during which participating vessel owners will receive financial compensation to refrain from pelagic longline fishing. Participants will be encouraged to fish for yellowfin tuna and swordfish using alternative gear, which result in lower bycatch, so they can continue to bring fish to market. The project is tailored to restore resources injured by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill and does not affect existing management practices or regulations.

Why was this project launched?

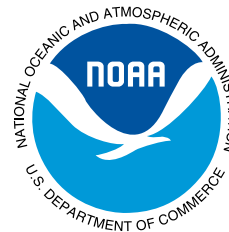
Many species of oceanic (or pelagic) fish in the Gulf of Mexico were injured during the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, including tuna, billfish and mackerel, as well as deepwater fish such as lancetfish.

The goal of this project is to help restore a portion of the pelagic fish injured by the oil spill. The project is funded with money made available by BP. It was developed by federal and Gulf state natural resource Trustees, including NOAA, according to the Oil Pollution Act (OPA) and with opportunities for public review and comment.

What are the benefits of the project?

Restoring pelagic fish that were injured by the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill will benefit the Gulf of Mexico in the short- and long-term and will help compensate for a portion of the injuries to fish caused by the spill. The project will reduce fish mortality. When fishermen don't fish, less fish are caught, helping allow fish to grow and reproduce and supporting healthier populations of fish throughout the Gulf. A restored fishery and healthier Gulf will support healthy fish stocks, benefiting vessel owners and others whose livelihoods rely on the fishery.

Vessel owners participating in the project will be financially compensated to offset revenue lost as a result of participating in the voluntary repose period. Participants have the option to continue to fish during the repose period using alternative gear types provided by NFWF and NOAA:



Please see
www.nfwf.org/pll
for more information.

greenstick, buoy and deep drop rod and reel gear. Providing participants with additional gear options is intended to provide alternative harvest opportunities and help offset potential economic effects of the repose.

According to several studies, these gear types result in lower bycatch mortality but are relatively underused in the Gulf of Mexico. Bycatch mortality occurs when non-target species are accidentally caught and die. This portion of the project will provide participants with an opportunity to study and improve their proficiency with new gear types. Participating vessel owners who take alternative gear fishing trips will be compensated in addition to the repose.

How did this project come about?

Federal and state agencies are authorized under the Oil Pollution Act (OPA) to act as Trustees on behalf of the public, to assess injuries to natural resources that result from an oil spill and to plan for restoration to compensate for those injuries. Under the OPA, natural resource Trustees develop and implement plans for restoring natural resources under their trusteeship.

NOAA is authorized under the OPA to conduct the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process as a federal Trustee and to carry out restoration efforts to implement the project. The project was included and evaluated in the *Deepwater Horizon* Final Phase IV Early Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessments, which was subject to public review and comment. In September 2015, the Trustees selected this project for implementation to help restore oceanic fish injured by the spill. The project is the first developed by the *Deepwater Horizon* Trustees focused directly on working with fishermen to restore fish species injured as a result of the spill. The *Deepwater Horizon* settlement with BP allocated funding for restoration projects for fish and marine invertebrates, including the *Deepwater Horizon* Oceanic Fish Restoration Project.

Please visit the NOAA Gulf Spill Restoration website for more information: www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean.

Why did the project start so long after the oil spill?

The project was developed under the *Deepwater Horizon* early restoration process between BP and the Natural Resource

Trustees as part of a suite of projects for which BP agreed to provide funding before the full settlement was reached. The *Deepwater Horizon* early restoration funding approach was novel and unprecedented because it allowed projects to commence, when there was agreement between BP and the Trustees, prior to finalizing the Natural Resource Damage Assessment or reaching a settlement.

Deepwater Horizon early restoration projects commenced earlier in the restoration planning process than Trustees are normally able to start projects in most oil spills. Since the settlement was reached in 2016, the Trustees have been actively planning additional restoration activities for fish and marine invertebrates. It is expected that project planning and implementation will continue over the duration of the 15-year settlement payout period and beyond.

What impacts did the spill have on pelagic fish?

In addition to killing fish outright, the oil spill also had detrimental effects to those fish that survived the initial spill and cleanup. At various depths of Gulf of Mexico waters, scientists found negative impacts to fish, including cardiac (heart) toxicity and other developmental deformities such as a curved spine, reduced growth rates, impaired immune function, reduced swimming performance and inhibited reproduction. The *Deepwater Horizon* Oceanic Fish Restoration Project reduces fish mortality to allow fish to grow and reproduce, helping support healthier populations of fish throughout the Gulf.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

When did the project start?

The project started with the first repose period on March 1, 2017, initiated as a pilot. In subsequent years, the repose began on January 1.

Were previous project years successful?

Yes, the project has been successful in achieving reduced bycatch compared to pelagic longline gear. For the 2017 project year, seven vessel owners from Louisiana participated in a four-month pelagic longline repose and fished using greenstick gear for a collective total of 280 sea-days.

Due to its success, the project has continued to expand. In 2018 and 2019, the repose period took place from January 1 through June 30. In the 2018 project year, seven vessel owners from Louisiana and three vessel owners from Florida participated in the repose. In the 2019 project year, eight vessel owners from Louisiana and two vessel owners from Florida participated in the repose. Participants used greenstick, buoy and deep drop rod and reel gear for a collective total of almost 500 sea-days in 2018, and more than 500 sea-days in 2019.

Data show clear bycatch benefits: the amount of bycatch species caught using alternative gear was minimal and most of those that were caught were released alive.

What project enhancements have been made since 2017?

NFWF and NOAA made several enhancements to the project after the pilot year. To encourage broader geographic participation, the project includes separate auctions for vessel owners in the eastern and western Gulf of Mexico.

In 2017, participants were offered a choice of using greenstick gear to catch yellowfin tuna and buoy gear to catch swordfish. In 2018 and 2019, participants were offered additional alternative gear options — deep drop rod and reel gear to catch swordfish and buoy gear to catch both yellowfin tuna and swordfish.

NFWF and NOAA will continue to offer training opportunities on alternative gear for participants each year.

Do all vessel owners in the Gulf of Mexico have to participate in the project?

No. Participation in the repose is voluntary and limited – only a portion of the overall Gulf of Mexico pelagic longline fishing fleet will be selected to participate in any given year. Limiting participation will help to minimize potential financial impacts to area dealers and the shoreside economy, and it will help ensure that the Gulf’s pelagic longline fishery continues to generate high-quality products for both domestic and international markets. For more information on eligibility requirements, please see the “Project Details and Eligibility Requirements” document on the project website, www.nfwf.org/pll.

Is the project permanent? How long will it run?

No, it is not permanent. The project began in 2017 and NOAA and NFWF anticipate it will run for an additional three to five years, but there is no set expiration timeframe. The full length of the project will depend on the level of participation to meet restoration goals. The project is temporary, voluntary and is tailored to meet specific goals to restore a portion of the fish species that were injured by the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

What if a vessel owner wishes to participate in future years of the project?

If a vessel owner is selected to participate in 2020, they will have the opportunity to renew their contract annually pending NFWF review of compliance and performance.

If a vessel owner is not selected to participate in 2020, they may have the opportunity to join in the future. Based on an annual review of participation NFWF may offer additional opportunities each year to enter the project.

If a vessel owner opts not to renew the contract, and remains eligible to participate, they may reapply to any future opportunities. However, NFWF does not guarantee that future solicitations will occur.

PROJECT DETAILS

What are the key requirements to participate in the project?

- By agreeing to participate in the project, participants will refrain from all pelagic longline fishing during the repose period from January 1 through June 30, 2020.
- Participants will be required to remove their pelagic longline gear and are subject to vessel inspections to ensure no pelagic longline trips are taken during the repose.
- Participants must keep their Vessel Monitoring System units on at all times during the repose.
- Participants are subject to all existing regulations under the National Marine Fisheries Service Highly Migratory Species Management Division, U.S. Coast Guard, and applicable federal and state regulations and laws.

- For those who elect to participate in the alternative gear portion of the project: When requested, participants must take observers on board during alternative gear trips.
- Selected applicants will be provided with a one-year contract for participation in the 2020 project year. Interested participants will have the option to renew their contract annually pending NFWF review of compliance and performance.

Can participating vessel owners still fish during the pelagic longline repose?

Yes, they can fish but not with pelagic longline gear during the repose. Participants may fish in other fisheries if they have the required permits and are in compliance with the terms of their Participant Agreement and any Exempted Fishing Permits. They may also still fish using other gear types, including greenstick, buoy, deep drop rod and reel, bottom longline or any other gear associated with other active permits. In fact, during the repose period, participating vessels will be encouraged to use alternative gear to harvest yellowfin tuna and swordfish.

This alternative gear portion of the project provides an opportunity to improve the participants' proficiency with the gear. Participants can study the alternative gear, at no cost, and be at the forefront of finding ways to fish using these gear types in the Gulf of Mexico.

Are there new fishing regulations for the pelagic longline fishery in the Gulf of Mexico because of this project?

No. The project is voluntary, temporary and is tailored to restore a portion of fish affected by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The project does not change existing management practices or regulations. As a voluntary project, no new regulations are being issued by NOAA or any other government agency.

Please visit www.nfwf.org/pll for more information.



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