

NEW ENGLAND FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

ICCAT Report

I. STATUS

Meetings: The Advisory Committee to the U.S. Section to ICCAT met September 15-16, 2008 in both open and closed sessions to begin formulating U.S. positions for the annual full Commission meeting to be held in Morocco this November. The open session included updates on SCRS assessments for yellowfin/skipjack tuna, bluefin tuna, sharks, seabirds, and Mediterranean swordfish. The closed session included updates on bilateral and intersessional meetings and discussions of possible options in forming the U.S. positions to the above listed species. A final Advisory Committee meeting will be held October 26-28. There will be a public hearing on the first day followed by two days of closed meetings to consider input by members and finalize Committee advice to the U.S. delegation.

New England Council Interest: Of the 30 species managed by ICCAT, both swordfish and bluefin tuna have supported important fisheries in New England (up to \$32M ex-vessel for the latter, plus a substantial recreational component), while yellowfin tuna has supported a much smaller but locally significant fishery. Management of these species within U.S. waters is governed by the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act of 1975 et.seq. (ATCA) and administered by the HMS Division of NOAA Fisheries. Section 971b of the ATCA requires the establishment of an Advisory Committee that will include representation by the New England, Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf Fishery Management Councils. This representation is similar to the legally mandated consultative role the Council has taken in several recent habitat issues, and allows New England a direct voice in the management of these important species.

II. COUNCIL ACTION

Approval of Council positions on ICCAT managed fisheries of importance to New England for presentation to the ICCAT Advisory Committee and the Director of International Affairs (NOAA Fisheries).

III. INFORMATION

ICCAT: Since its inception in 1969, ICCAT has been successful in managing several “tuna and tuna-like” species, less successful with a few others, and spectacularly unsuccessful with both the Eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean and Western Atlantic stocks of bluefin tuna. International concerns prompted the FAO in 2005 to propose an independent review under international law as stated in the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The resulting *Report of the Independent Review*, released in September 2008, praised the basic structure of ICCAT and the quality of its scientific work, but it also described bluefin tuna management as “an international

disgrace” that resulted from “lack of compliance by many of its CPCs” (member nations). The report went on to recommend many changes to reverse this deplorable situation.

Western Atlantic bluefin tuna: In 1998, ICCAT began a rebuilding program to return WBFT to MSY in twenty years through TAC adjustments. Over the past several years the TAC has been at 2100 mt, of which the U.S. share is 57.48%. Until recent years, actual catches have often been much higher, due to a provision for carrying over unused quota. The last assessment was this year, the next will be in 2010. The fishery is considered overfished with overfishing occurring. Actual 2007 catch = 1624 mt, or 77% of the TAC, with the U.S. catch < ½ of its quota for the fourth straight year. The current assessment numbers are:

$$\begin{aligned} B/B_{msy} &= 0.14 - 0.57* \\ B_{2007}/B_{1975} &= 0.25 \\ F_{2007}/F_{msy} &= 1.27 - 2.18* \end{aligned}$$

*the spread indicates uncertainty in recruitment due to lack of fishery-independent data.

The continuing failure of the U.S. to catch more than a fraction of its quota may be the result of reduced opportunity, continuing decline in the stock, or a combination of the two. Canada continues to catch its quota, but their fishery has become concentrated on very large breeders in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and is probably not sustainable. The SCRS recently stated that “evidence is accumulating which indicates that both the productivity of western Atlantic bluefin and western Atlantic bluefin fisheries are linked to the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock...the Committee is even more concerned about the status of the western stock than it was a year ago.” The SCRS has recommended that the TAC be reduced to 1500 mt or as near zero as possible. The Advisory Committee is considering nearly a dozen options for recommendation to the U.S. delegation, of which the following are recommended to the NEFMC:

1. Reduce the WBFT 2009 TAC to 1500 mt. This has the advantage of reducing the likelihood that the U.S. will lose quota share based upon underharvest. It also follows the requirement in the domestic fisheries to manage by the best available science, placing us in a somewhat more tenable position in negotiating management measures for the EBFT fishery, especially in light of the emerging understanding of the linkage between the two.
2. Remove the carryover of underharvest, and require an immediate (next season) payback of overages. Even negotiated TACs were regularly overfished until the past four years when the U.S. fishery collapsed.

Two other options that have merit should be held off for a year. The first of these is a provision for time/area closures to protect large breeders in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The Canadians may do this themselves, so we should hold off for now. The second is an April through June spawning closure to longlining in the Gulf of Mexico. The longliners are developing a hook that will straighten out on fish over 270 pounds, so we should hold off for now pending their results.

Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna: Catch reporting in the EBFT fisheries is very poor, especially in the Mediterranean, but total catch can be fairly well estimated by international sales. Overcapacity is out of control, with the number of large purse seiners in the fishery having doubled just since 2004. The SCRS recommended last year that the catch be held to less than 15,000 mt or as near zero as

possible. In spite of this, ICCAT set the 2008 TAC at 29,500 mt, and the actual catch was estimated at 61,141 mt. The SCRS estimates that the population has declined by 15% per year since 2000 and faces imminent collapse. The numbers are:

$$\begin{aligned} B_{2007}/B_{msy} &= 0.2 \text{ (est)} \\ F_{2007}/F_{msy} &> 3.0 \end{aligned}$$

Although the U.S. doesn't fish for EBFT, the continuing debacle affects us since at least part of our fishery appears to be supported by cross-ocean movement of EBFT. The extent of this effect is not yet clear. In November 2007 the U.S. proposed the indefinite suspension of the EBFT fishery. The proposal went nowhere, of course, but it placed us on the side of the angels and offered the implied threat that our opposition to CITES listing may be weakening. The NEFMC may recommend continuing the 2007 proposal for a closure of the fishery or go with any or all of the following:

1. Increased mortality controls, e.g.: time/area closures in the Mediterranean, at least during spawning months; lower the TAC; increase minimum size limits.
2. Institute the recommendations in the *Report of the Independent Review*.
3. Establish vessel quotas or national capacity quotas.
4. Reapportion quota shares to nations that comply with data/fishing regulations.

As a last recommendation, Chris Rogers has been appointed chair of the ICCAT Compliance Committee, and the NEFMC should draft a letter supporting his aggressive prosecution of that post.

Atlantic yellowfin tuna: Yellowfin and bigeye tuna appear to be holding their own or slightly declining, but a purse seine fishery in the Gulf of Guinea that targets small juveniles presents a recruitment threat. ICCAT initiated spatial and temporal spawning closures in 2004 which should be expanded, with the requirement that FADs be removed during closures. We may want to so recommend, or hold off for a year to see how it goes. Both fisheries were down in 2008 south of New England and in the mid-Atlantic states, but that may have been as much the result of fuel cost as a decline in the stocks.