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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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UNITED STATES MAKES PUSH FOR BLUEFIN TUNA RECOVERY

The United States made a bold attempt last week to ensure the future of eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna. The United States fought hard for tougher conservation measures to end overfishing of this stock during a meeting of the international commission that manages bluefin and other tuna and tuna-like species. The 2006 stock assessment for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna included grim news that the stock is being severely over-harvested and will collapse if strong conservation measures were not adopted and implemented without delay. The meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), held in Dubrovnik, Croatia, began November 17 and concluded Sunday, November 26.

"The United States wants to manage commercial tuna fishing in an environmentally sound way," said Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez. "We want to limit harvests to sustainable levels to ensure the future of tuna stocks and the fishermen who depend on them. We will continue to work with the world's fishing community towards these goals."

The United States strongly supported reducing annual eastern bluefin tuna catches to 15,000 metric tons. For the last four years, the annual catch for the eastern fishery was capped at 32,000 metric tons; however, due to wide-spread non-compliance, scientists estimate the actual catch has been much higher – 50,000 metric tons per year or more. The United States also supported expanding the closed season in the Mediterranean to the peak spawning month of June for all bluefin tuna fleets, which catch bluefin using different types of fishing gear. These proposals are consistent with scientific advice.

Contrary to scientific advice, the European Commission (EC) put forward a proposal to set a quota for 2007 of 29,500 metric tons with a gradual reduction each year so that the quota would reach 25,500 metric tons by 2010. The EC measure only closed the fishery in June for the longline gear fleet, even though the purse seine gear fleet catches between 70-80 percent of all bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean. The EC proposal also eliminated requirements for countries to pay back over-harvests through future quota reductions, while under-harvests were allowed to be carried over to future years.

Although the EC proposal included improvements to monitoring and control of the fishery, the quota reductions are likely too little, too late even if they can be perfectly implemented. In a bid to block the proposal, the United States requested a roll call vote for the first time in ICCAT history. Unfortunately, eastern bluefin tuna harvesting nations voted 10-8 in favor of the EC proposal despite the fact that it will continue the severe overexploitation of eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna.

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“I am extremely disappointed with the inability of nations which harvest eastern bluefin tuna to adopt a meaningful stock recovery plan,” said Dr. Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service and U.S. government commissioner to ICCAT. “Of particular concern is the blatant disregard of strong scientific advice on the need to substantially reduce catches.”

In contrast, the United States successfully pushed for the adoption of a proposal to lower the annual catch of western Atlantic bluefin tuna from 2,700 metric tons to 2,100 metric tons, in line with scientific advice to stop overfishing. Importantly, the United States maintained its current percentage share of quota. Despite the strong actions taken in the West, however, there is substantial concern that the flawed agreement for the eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna stock could jeopardize the effectiveness of ICCAT’s western Atlantic rebuilding program, due to mixing between the two stocks.

“We have always followed scientific advice for managing the western stock of bluefin tuna, and this year was no different,” Dr. Hogarth said. “The United States has done the right thing to protect this magnificent fish for the future, unlike our counterparts fishing for eastern bluefin.”

Dr. Hogarth noted that the United States has always complied with ICCAT rules for western Atlantic bluefin tuna fisheries, and he indicated that the United States will focus close attention to the status of both stocks under these new plans. In addition, compliance with the eastern plan will be closely monitored.

ICCAT made progress during this year’s meeting in the following additional areas:

- After long and difficult discussion, ICCAT adopted a new management arrangement through 2008 for swordfish that took into consideration the scientific advice, the sacrifices made by U.S. fishermen to help rebuild this species, and the needs of countries with developing fisheries. Significantly, the United States maintained its current percentage share of the swordfish quota. Swordfish negotiations were particularly tough given the number of countries that demanded increases in their quotas. North Atlantic swordfish has been under a rebuilding program since 2000 and is now essentially recovered.
- The rebuilding plan for blue and white marlin was extended through 2010 and enhanced with the addition of observer requirements to improve data collection and limits on artisanal fleets.
- The Commission recognized the efforts made by Taiwan to address its fleet capacity and control problems over the last year. ICCAT reinstated Taiwan’s bigeye tuna quota with the proviso that Taiwan continue to implement sufficient monitoring and control measures and work to eliminate illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing.

Dr. Hogarth, current chairman of ICCAT, was accompanied at the meeting by commercial and recreational commissioners Randi Parks Thomas and Robert Hayes, as well as a delegation that included U.S. government and constituent representatives.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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