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NOAA issued the following statement about the outcome of the annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). The ICCAT meeting concluded last night in Brazil.

STATEMENT

“As a member of ICCAT, the United States entered this meeting seeking the strongest possible agreement for the conservation of the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna,” said Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator.

The ICCAT agreement on eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna is a marked improvement over the current rules, but it is insufficient to guarantee the long-term viability of either the fish or the fishery. While we are disappointed that the total allowable catch is not lower, we strongly support the commitment to set future catch levels in line with scientific advice, shorten the fishing season, reduce capacity, and close the fishery if the stocks continue to decline. We remain committed to pursuing every legitimate avenue to recover Atlantic bluefin tuna and ensure their long-term survival.

Dr. Rebecca Lent, Director of the Office of International Affairs at NOAA Fisheries Service and the head of the U.S. delegation at ICCAT said, “Negotiations were extremely challenging this year at ICCAT. The United States sought a package of measures for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna that would halt overfishing and provide for rebuilding by 2023 with a high probability of success. The science indicates that a total quota level of 8,000 metric tons or lower would have achieved that. While I am pleased with the commitments for significantly lower quotas next year, I am disappointed that parties did not take immediate measures to significantly reduce the quota for the 2010 season.”

Importantly though, under U.S. leadership in the Compliance Committee, ICCAT made unprecedented progress and held countries accountable for compliance infractions through formal identifications. These identifications can be the basis for future sanctions and are intended to, among other things, help reduce illegal fishing and improve submission of fishing data, which is crucial for scientific projections. In addition, ICCAT adopted a U.S.-sponsored framework for presentation of future scientific advice that will facilitate the use of a precautionary management approach.

Background:

This year, as in years past, U.S. negotiators sought a suite of management measures that would end overfishing and help rebuild stocks of Atlantic bluefin tuna. Over the past decade, countries that fished in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean did so at two to three times the sustainable level, causing a significant and rapid decline in the stock.

At its annual meeting, which ended late Sunday November 15, ICCAT adopted the following agreements:

ICCAT has agreed to a total allowable catch limit of 13,500 metric tons for eastern Atlantic Mediterranean bluefin tuna, down from the 2009 limit of 22,000 metric tons. Importantly, this measure also commits to a science-based catch level for 2011 to 2013 with a 60 percent probability of rebuilding the stock to healthy levels by 2023, lengthens the existing purse seine fishing closure for 30 days during the critical spawning period, freezes all joint fishing operations to enhance compliance, and commits to reducing fishing capacity.

ICCAT adopted a science-based rebuilding program for northern albacore tuna intended to rebuild the stock within 10 years and strong conservation and management measures for Bigeye tuna that reduces harvest levels in line with scientific advice.

ICCAT adopted a binding measure to prohibit retention of bigeye thresher sharks which are considered highly vulnerable by scientists.

ICCAT lowered the quota for North Atlantic swordfish to 13,700 metric tons to comply with scientific advice and extended the allocation arrangement that was previously in place. As part of this measure, the United States and Canada committed to develop a joint scientific program to examine ways to reduce sea-turtle bycatch in the swordfish fishery. Results will be presented at the 2010 ICCAT meeting.

ICCAT adopted a new process for providing scientific advice that will give managers clear information on the levels of risk and the timeframes involved in meeting fisheries management goals. This is a key step towards better incorporating precautionary and science-based management approaches.