

NOAA Summary of the 21st Regular Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

The Twenty-first Regular Meeting of ICCAT was held in Porto de Galinhas, Brazil, November 9-15, 2009. It was preceded by a one day meeting of ICCAT's recreational working group (Nov 6) and a two day weekend session of the Compliance Committee (Nov 7-8). The U.S. Delegation was led by Dr. Rebecca Lent, Director of the Office of International Affairs, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). NOAA Chief of Staff Margaret Spring attended much of the meeting as a clear demonstration of high level NOAA interest in ICCAT. The United States was also represented by the Commercial and Recreational Commissioners to ICCAT, Randi Thomas and Ellen Peel, respectively. The U.S. Delegation included staff from NOAA and NMFS, the State Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Capitol Hill, and the private sector, including representatives of the commercial, recreational, and environmental communities. Of ICCAT's 48 members, 38 were in attendance. A number of cooperating parties, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations also attended, including Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) and Monaco. ICCAT considered a wide array of issues, and the United States was successful in advancing many of its priorities. A summary of ICCAT actions follows:

Swordfish: After lengthy debate, ICCAT adopted the Panel 4 Chair's proposal to extend the North Atlantic swordfish management measures in effect for 2009 through 2010 but with a reduced TAC of 13,700 mt, which is in line with scientific advice. The existing quota allocations for EC, United States, Canada, and Japan remain unchanged. The proposal includes a provision for a prorated deduction if the TAC of 13,700 mt is exceeded in 2010. The EC is allowed to count up to 200 mt of its North Atlantic swordfish catch against its uncaught South Atlantic swordfish quota, and Senegal agreed to a transfer 100 t of quota to Canada. Because of sea turtle bycatch concerns in pelagic longline fisheries for swordfish, Canada and the United States agreed to establish a research plan to develop Best Management Practices, observer standards, monitoring requirements and bycatch estimates with a view to minimizing impacts on sea turtles and the marine ecosystem. ICCAT also adopted new management measures for South Atlantic and Mediterranean swordfish stocks. For the South Atlantic stock, a scientifically based TAC of 15,000 mt was established for 2010-2012 with a cap of 45,000 mt over the three-year plan. The United States retained its 100 mt quota as well as its ability to carry forward up to 100 mt of under harvest -- but agreed along with other parties to transfer some underharvest to help achieve agreement. For Mediterranean swordfish, ICCAT adopted a measure that required additional catch permitting requirements as well as reporting and monitoring requirements, including a fishing vessel register for the Mediterranean swordfish fleet, and further assessment by SCRS on the effectiveness of the time/area closure. Unfortunately, the proposal did not expand the time/area closure in the Mediterranean as recommended by the SCRS.

Bluefin tuna: Negotiations for new management measures for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna were very contentious, particularly in light of the proposal by Monaco to list that species on Appendix I of CITES, which would prohibit international trade in the species. Ultimately, ICCAT adopted a substantially reduced TAC for the eastern fishery of 13,500 mt in 2010 (a 32% reduction from the previously agreed 2010 TAC of 19,950 mt) and significantly expanded time and area closures for the Mediterranean that allow purse seine fishing for only one month (May 15-June 15). In addition, the measure mandates establishing a TAC for the years 2011-2013 at the level that will ensure a 60% chance of rebuilding the stock by 2023. Turkey registered reservations on the paragraphs of the measure that required additional capacity reductions and on limitations on joint fishing operations. The measure was adopted and these reservations were included in the record. A proposal to require monthly catch reporting and to establish an active vessel list for the western fishery was not adopted and no serious efforts were made to reopen the western rebuilding program.

Albacore tuna: A rebuilding program was established for northern albacore through 2020 with a TAC of 28,000 mt for 2010 and 2011 - consistent with scientific advice. The United States accepted a 2% reduction in quota to 527 mt. The bulk of the reduction was shouldered by the EC and Taiwan.

Bigeye tuna: Scientifically based TAC of 85,000 mt was established for bigeye tuna (down from 90,000 mt) for 2010. Unfortunately, the 30% limit on carry forward of quota underharvest was eliminated. In addition, the Commission was unable to agree on an improved time and area closure for the Gulf of Guinea. These matters will be reconsidered in 2010 after the SCRS stock assessment.

Sharks: ICCAT adopted a proposal that prohibits the retention of bigeye thresher sharks with an exception for Mexico's small-scale coastal catch of less than 110 fish. A U.S. proposal to cap shortfin mako landings at 2008 levels was not adopted given lack of agreement to exempt mako sharks taken as bycatch from the restrictions. Bycatch is the leading cause of mortality of shortfin mako sharks. The proposal was referred for consideration in 2010. An EC/Canadian proposal on porbeagle sharks was also not adopted due to concerns that it was not consistent with scientific advice. It would have prohibited targeted porbeagle fisheries in the Convention area but would have allowed existing directed fisheries within a Party's national jurisdiction to continue if the TAC complied with SCRS recommendations. It will be reconsidered in 2010 and a joint meeting of regional fisheries bodies may take place in 2010 to consider coordinated management actions for porbeagle. A Belize/U.S./Brazil proposal to require sharks to be landed with their fins naturally attached was also not adopted as it was considered too far reaching and more research on the impacts was needed. It was deferred for consideration in 2010.

Sailfish: A U.S. proposal requiring live release of sailfish by pelagic longline fleets was not adopted but will be reconsidered in 2010. In particular, some countries called for expanding the scope of the requirement to recreational fisheries.

Seabirds and Sea Turtles: After lengthy negotiations, a unified seabird proposal was considered but not adopted by ICCAT. Agreement could not be reached concerning applicable mitigation measures for the South Atlantic (south of 20 degrees S.). The U.S. introduced a measure on sea turtles that required parties to submit information on domestic efforts undertaken to protect sea turtles and to carry on board disentanglement and release gear. The measure was not adopted but may be reconsidered in 2010.

Compliance: ICCAT had its most thorough review to date of the implementation of all ICCAT rules and took strong action to address infractions. In particular, ICCAT identified approximately 3/4ths of its members under the ICCAT trade measures instrument and most others, including the United States, will receive letters of concern. The identified parties have one year to correct infractions, most of which pertained to data reporting problems. Failure to rectify the problems could lead to the imposition of trade restrictions or other penalties. The Compliance Committee will review these matters at its November 2010 meeting and determine appropriate next steps. The Committee will also meet in the spring 2010 in Europe for an interim review of implementation of agreed measures before the start of the 2010 bluefin tuna fishing season. Just after that meeting, a working group will convene to consider development of a regional port State agreement for ICCAT and to consider other monitoring and control measures.

Other Matters : A U.S. proposal to apply the Kobe II strategy matrix to bluefin tuna and bigeye tuna in 2010 was agreed. A second meeting of the Future of ICCAT working group will be convened in Brasilia in early 2010 to consider possible changes to the ICCAT Convention and other matters to strengthen ICCAT. A U.S. proposal to expand the scope of the IUU vessel list to non-fishing vessels and another to expand the scope of the authorized vessel list from vessels above 24 meters to 20 meters and above were agreed. A proposal to establish minimum standards for observer programs was not agreed. Elections were held in 2009, and all sitting chairs (including Chris Rogers for the Compliance Committee) were re-elected with the following exceptions: Zakia Driouich (Morocco) was elected First Vice Chair, Papa Mansa Keita (Senegal) was elected Second Vice Chair, Andre Share (South Africa) was elected Chair of the Permanent Working Group, and Sylvie LaPointe (Canada) was elected Chair of the Finance and Administration Committee. The 2010 ICCAT annual meeting will be held in Paris from November 15-21 and will be preceded by a special Compliance Committee session on November 12-13, although some members requested that these dates be changed to avoid an overlap with the end of Ramadan.