Comments and "Talking Points" for Fisherman "Listening Meetings" on ESA Petition for Bluefin

General

1. In a few weeks, NOAA will begin to write a STATUS REVIEW report on the bluefin. This is a legal requirement under Endangered Species Act [ESA] law and very important step in the process of determining if bluefin are to be given "endangered" status.
2. Listening Meetings are being held for fishermen *at the request of the bluefin fishermen* so that we can contribute our broad, first-hand knowledge of bluefin, enabling our contribution to be a part of the STATUS REVIEW. This is our only chance to be a part of the process so it is critical that everyone attend and plan to speak on the issues.
3. ESA law is very specific about what kind of information can be used by NOAA in making the decision regarding endangered status for bluefin. ESA law states that a decision CANNOT take into account *economic consequences*. In other words, NOAA, by law, is *not* allowed to consider any information relating to the economic impact of a decision to list a species as "endangered". [losing jobs or businesses, financial hardship, etc.]. This may seem completely unfair, but it is ESA law and we have to follow it. Therefore, any economic issues should *not* be discussed.
4. Aside from the issue of economics, fishermen are free to speak about a wide range of issues regarding bluefin. We should focus our discussions on what we, the fishermen, can contribute from our direct experience. A great deal is not known by scientists about bluefin and they will be the first to say this. So, the scientists *want* to hear what you have to say.
5. Please take the time to prepare what you would like to speak about before going into the meeting. Make a small list of items you want to bring up on a scrap of paper so you don't accidentally forget something. Keep it friendly. The people from NOAA who attend this meeting are there to hear and take note of what we have to say.

POSSIBLE TALKING POINTS FOR THE MEETINGS

We are providing a list of "talking points" which you can read and comment on in the meetings. You can choose to comment on any of these items or any other items you consider important. Because of the different nature of General/Harpoon and Recreational Categories we have broken down the talking points accordingly. We are sure that you can come up with many more ideas given the importance of these meetings….a successful petition for listing bluefin within the Endangered Species Act means ***no recreational or commercial fishing for Bluefin in the future.***

GENERAL CATEGORY AND HARPOON CATEGORY

1. Have you noticed any increase in catch over the last 5 years? Ten years? If you noticed an increase, you should mention it.
2. Have you noticed any change in foraging habits of bluefin? For example, if in the past bluefin were foraging on herring in your area but in recent years there is much less herring and therefore there are fewer bluefin to catch, this is an example of a migratory change based upon foraging conditions.
3. If years ago you were used to finding bluefin closer to shore but now they are further away, you should mention this.

4. Are there other issues that affect your fishing activities? An example would be a high concentration of dogfish in your area that eat your bait before you can get your bait to the bluefin.
5. Within the last 5 years, have you found bluefin in areas where they were not known to be found previously?
6. Do you believe that the current regulations and NOAA's rebuilding plan for bluefin are adequate to protect and increase bluefin stock?
7. Do you believe that bluefin is being over fished in our fishery in any category [General Category, Harpoon, Recreational, Long line or Purse Seine]?
8. Bluefin, like all fish and like humans, do get diseases sometimes. Have you seen any evidence of disease affecting bluefin? If you have noticed this, you should mention it.
9. Have you seen any evidence of other predators preying upon bluefin excessively? If you do, you should mention this.
10. There is nothing wrong with criticism of fishery policy, of ICCAT, and of how NOAA/NMFS manage their duties as *stewards* of the bluefin fishery. Here are some points to think about and if you have any information or a reaction you should discuss this:

    A. Much of the data used in determining bluefin stock size comes from the number of fish that we catch [i.e. if the same number of fishermen catch more fish this year than last year then it is believed that the stock has increased.]. There has been criticism from ICCAT scientists that our regulations [minimum length and bag limits] distorts the statistics so that the data suggests that there are fewer fish. As an example, if our minimum size was less than 73", or 5 bag limit instead of 3, we might catch more fish and therefore our total catch will increase, suggesting an increase in biomass. This problem is unique to the US fishery because we have a very low bag limit per day and the minimum 73" length requirement is unusually high, as compared with other Atlantic/Mediterranean nations which fish for bluefin. Do you agree or disagree with ICCAT scientists that our regulations make our catch and therefore the size of our stock appear to be smaller?
    B. "Fishery-dependent data" is information that comes from the fishery itself i.e. the amount of catch and CPUE [catch per unit effort]. "Fishery-i*ndependent* data is information that comes from other sources such as large-scale tagging programs, aerial surveys, larval surveys, and developing fishery-independent indices of abundance to better track trends in biomass and better estimate fishing mortality rates. SCRS [the scientific arm of ICCAT] in its 2010 Data Preparation Report makes a big point about the crucial importance of member countries acquiring "fishery-independent data" which is crucially important in testing the validity of "fishery-dependent" data. SCRS pointed out that the only fishery-independent data developed by the US has been larval surveys. Other countries are doing much more along these lines. For example, SCRS, in its report strenuously emphasized the need for aerial surveys, not for the purpose of counting the number of fish but to compare the density of schools and to locate schools from season to season [according to a new protocol detailed in Bonhommeau et al 2010]. The US develops very little "fishery-independent data" and desperately needs to acquire much more of this data. NOAA is aware of this and has just begun in September 2010 to take steps to increase fishery-independent data, including aerial surveys. Unfortunately, this data will not be available in time for the STATUS REVIEW. Do you see this as a problem?

C. According to SCRS/ICCAT, the US fishery catch and CPUE data could be skewed [artificially low] due to declines in abundance *OR* availability. Very simply, this means that US bluefin fishery catch had decreases because of either, 1/ declines in the number of fish or, 2/ because of the fact that the fish moved elsewhere, out of range of our boats. They stated :

SCRS examined the question of whether observed decreases in commercial landings of western Atlantic bluefin tuna in the US fishery were due to declines in abundance or availability.

However, in the very next sentence, they stated:

The authors concluded that from 1979-2005, the mean longitude of bluefin schools shifted eastward >350 kilometers (-70.39 to - 68.07°W), while mean latitude (40.92 - 42.73°W) alternated between the northern and southern Gulf of Maine.[SCRS 2010/116]:

They go on to say:

The authors suggested that the redistribution of the Gulf of Maine foraging assemblage might be due in part to fish seeking more favorable forage offshore and northward to the Canadian Maritimes.

SCRS/ICCAT are of the opinion that reduced catch in the US fishery is a result of the bluefin having moved eastward [more than 350km or 217 miles] and out of range of our boats, presumably to find more food on which to forage. Do you believe this is true? Have you seen any evidence of this?

D. Japanese long line fishing activity, although reduced as compared with a decade ago, is still going on in the central north Atlantic. So, the Japanese long line catch is used by SCRS/ICCAT along with the US and Canadian catch as part of the total catch for the western Atlantic bluefin. SCRS/ICCAT had this to say in it's 2010 stock assessment:

The Group observed that the Japanese long line fishery has also experienced increased catch rates in the western North Atlantic recently, which could be consistent with the authors' redistribution hypothesis.

And had this to say about the Canadian fishery:

The southwest Nova Scotia CPUE series has had a fairly stable trend through the mid- to late-1990s, and has been steadily increasing since a low in 2000. Catch rates in the Gulf of St. Lawrence increased slightly from 1997 to 2003, rapidly increased in 2004 and have remained high. Catch rates since 2007 are the highest in the series and in 2009 were exceptionally high (five times higher than the previous series average).

What do you think about the more recent higher catch recorded by the Canadians and the Japanese long line vessels when you compare it to the catch we have been

experiencing in recent years? If you think about the problems mentioned in Section C. in which SCRS stated that bluefin are moving eastward, away from the continental US, do you see any problems in connection with your own fishing activities? For example, if you are used to taking your boat no more than 40nm from port and, because of lack of forage bluefin have moved further offshore [further eastward] are you able to increase your fuel capacity in order to catch these fish?

RECREATIONAL CATEGORY

1. What percentage of your seasonal catch was released?
2. In the last few seasons what is the average weight/size of the bluefin you have been catching? If, for example, you have been catching smaller fish earlier in the season and larger ones later in the season, give two averaged weights/sizes.
3. Have you noticed any increase in catch over the last 5 years? Ten years? If you noticed an increase, you should mention it.
4. Are there other issues that affect your fishing activities? An example would be a high concentration of dogfish in your area that eat your bait before you can get your bait to the bluefin.
5. NOAA uses a telephone survey and dock side monitoring to estimate the recreational catch. Then, NOAA uses a mathematical formula to estimate total catch based upon this data. There are numerous problems with this method. Going forward, NOAA needs to find a better way to determine Recreational catch. If you want accurate catch statistics in the Recreational category you need to express this to NOAA. If you are not confident in the accuracy of the catch statistics for previous seasons because of the methods they use and you are concerned about how this will affect the Status Review you need to express this as well.
6. Where do you traditionally fish for bluefin? Be specific. [Stellwagen Bank, East of Block Island, Jeffreys Ledge, Ipswitch Bay, Saco Bay, off of Chatham, off of Beaufort, east of Oregon Inlet, etc.]
7. Do you agree with SCRS/ICCAT's statement below:

   The indices presented seemed to reflect a strong cohort moving through the fishery. It was indicated that the CPUE indices do not seem to show any large recruitment after this strong cohort entered the fishery. The Group discussed if the apparent lack of strong recruitment could be a reflection of how the recreational fishery operates (i.e., targeting and landing larger fish in this moving cohort and ignoring or discarding smaller fish). It was indicated that the data collected (e.g., size of fish being target, discards, etc.) allow to account for operational changes of the fleet. [Report of the 2010 ICCAT Bluefin Data Preparatory Meeting, Madrid Jun 14-19, 2010, P. 5]

   The above means that the size limitation [27"-59"] for recreational fishing limits the amount of information NOAA can obtain on the abundance of bluefin in the fishery to those fish which measure between 27" and 59". Recreational catch records tell them nothing about bluefin from 0"to 27" in size or from 59" to 73" in size [73" is the minimum size allowed for the General Category]. This drastically limits NOAA's view of bluefin abundance because there are a great many fish represented in the sizes which we are not allowed to catch and retain. Do you consider this important?