

American Bluefin Tuna Association

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For Immediate Release:

2011 Annual Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
(ICCAT) Istanbul, Turkey, November 9-19, 2011

Istanbul, November 19, 2011 - ICCAT concluded its 22nd Regular Annual Meeting held in Istanbul, Turkey, achieving historic progress on both East and West Atlantic bluefin populations management and rebuilding existing plans. ICCAT also revised and made more effective conservation plans for bigeye and yellowfin tuna, in particular in the critically important Gulf of Guinea (GOG). ICCAT also concluded a renewal of the North Atlantic swordfish plan, enacted protections for the silky shark and initiated significant improvements in connection with compliance issues and critical data submission protocols. Many other continuing fishery management issues were addressed during the 12-day meeting.

Atlantic Bluefin

The dramatic progress made on rebuilding East Atlantic (Mediterranean) bluefin biomass was confirmed during presentations by ICCAT's scientific arm, the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS). SCRS Chairman Dr. Josu Santiago Burrutxaga, announced, "Good News: the stock is projected to increase over the projection period in all cases." He noted emphatically that there had been strong decreases in harvesting of the East stock, in 2011 having arrived to an historic low of 11,294 metric tons (MT), a level not seen since the 1950's and well below the most recent recommendations from SCRS for 2011 of 13,500 mt.

For the West Atlantic bluefin populations, Dr. Santiago reported that the U.S. fishery index of juvenile fish is over twice the level of 1995 and 1996. For Canada, SCRS data shows that the Gulf of St Lawrence relative index of population abundance is nearly "off the historical charts" or about triple the level in 1981. Further the Japanese Northwest Atlantic longline index (considered to be the most reliable) is dramatically increasing as well, approaching the relative level of 30 years ago.

In the West Atlantic bluefin fishery, Dr. Santiago confirmed that the spawning stock biomass is definitely increasing and fishing mortality on spawning bluefin has decreased.

Finally, Dr. Santiago noted that there was "no evidence of a fishery collapse" and no basis for changing the SCRS's most recent recommendations regarding harvesting levels. Therefore, catches at the combined level (East + West fisheries) of 15,300 mt are expected to continue to allow to rebuild and sustain both populations and fisheries with very high probability levels within 11 and 7 years respectively.

With a combined scientifically recommended precautionary catch level of bluefin to rebuild both populations from the current standing stock of millions of fish, ICCAT now has the strongest validation to date that neither East nor West Atlantic bluefin tuna are in any danger and therefore not requiring special protections.

Atlantic Yellowfin and Bigeye Tuna

The US pressed ICCAT to agree to the first-ever comprehensive, long-term conservation plan for both yellowfin tuna and bigeye tuna. The plan includes a more effective Time-Area Closure in the GOG, the most important spawning grounds and nursery in the Atlantic Ocean for these species of tuna. Under the plan, a specific part of this region will be closed to fishing activity for two months beginning with the upcoming fishing season, with the intention to reduce mortality on juvenile bigeye and yellowfin. Further, action was taken to control and reduce the extensive use of Fish Aggregation Devices (FAD's) in the GOG, a particularly effective way of harvesting juvenile yellowfin and bigeye, with the intention to protect and allow escapement of juvenile fish from these spawning/nursery grounds. The U.S. pressed for but lost a battle to increase the effect of this closed area by adding the month of December to the closure months of January and February and by extending the western boundary by 5 degrees to the west. The U.S. interest is to ensure an adequate level of juvenile escapement to restore abundance of yellowfin and bigeye to once prolific levels in recreational and commercial fishing grounds in the offshore waters off the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast coasts of the US.

Atlantic Swordfish

ICCAT also addressed extending North Atlantic swordfish conservation measures and developed a new program to make sure that carry forward of uncaught quota are not allowed in order to prevent "stockpiling" of quota. Thus, a new measure has been added to insure that the total Atlantic-wide quota of 13,700 mt not be exceeded. Countries exceeding their quota will be required to payback any overages within 2 years.

Atlantic Marlin

The US also put forward a recommendation that is intended to substantially improve current efforts to strengthen the plan to rebuild Blue Marlin and White Marlin.

Compliance and Fishing Overcapacity

The ICCAT Compliance Committee spent nearly 3 days over the course of the meeting investigating allegations of illegal, unregulated and unreported catch of yellowfin and bigeye tuna and ultimately initiated a trade and permitting sanction process against Ghana for non-payback of prior harvesting overages, failure to comply with the ICCAT Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) and for exceeding vessel capacity limitations. Korea was similarly sanctioned for having excessive fishing capacity in the GOG.

In general, it is apparent that greater levels of compliance with ICCAT measures is occurring because of the effectiveness of ICCAT's Compliance Committee and this was confirmed by SCRS.

The PEW Environmental Group's report on overfishing of bluefin in the Mediterranean entitled, "Mind the Gap", was submitted to ICCAT after the conclusion of the Bluefin Tuna Working Group and after the formal SCRS week long meeting. Therefore, the Commission had no opportunity to formally review the document, its conclusions and methodologies. All Parties have been advised to review the Pew's data for further analysis by ICCAT next year.

Bycatch and Discards

ICCAT contract parties also reached an historic agreement to control and monitor discards of bycatch by all parties of tuna species under its control. Until now only the US and Canada have provided data on the levels of bycatch and discarded fish managed by ICCAT.

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** From 9:00AM local time November 21, 2011