



New bluefin stock assessments show stunning reversal in abundance

As recently as 2009, the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) was warning that the eastern Atlantic stock of bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean Sea faced “a high risk of fisheries and stock collapse.”

This implied terrible stock condition led the Prince of Monaco in 2010 to submit a proposal for an Appendix 1 listing of Atlantic bluefin tuna under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which, had it succeeded, would have ended international trade.

The CITES threat was one of the major motivations that pushed ICCAT to reduce and enforce its eastern bluefin quota down to 13,500 metric tons (mt) from catches that only a few years earlier were exceeding 60,000 mt. It also led to a completely unnecessary cut in our western Atlantic quota in 2010.

What a huge difference a few years can make. During the ICCAT science meetings held Sept. 22-Oct. 3, a dramatically improved picture of the west and east populations of bluefin emerged.

For our fisheries in the western Atlantic, scientists found that the biomass had increased substantially each year since 2009. They also determined that there is no overfishing of the stock and the stock is not overfished.

Scientists continue to debate the issue of potential future bluefin recruitment, which refers to the number of young fish that are added to the biomass each year due to successful spawning.

The low recruitment hypothesis refers to a situation in which environmental factors, also called an ecosystem “regime shift,” have a great impact on the number of bluefin births and survival. Under low recruitment, the abundant recruitments experienced in the early 1970s are no longer to be expected.



GUEST COLUMN

by Rich Ruais

The high recruitment hypothesis suggests that we can rebuild the stock to uncertain historical levels again.

The critical development this year is that updated and revised estimates of recruitment from this year’s assessment shift the weight of evidence strongly in favor of the low recruitment hypothesis.

The really good news from the ICCAT science meetings and new evidence is that the western bluefin biomass is now more than twice the size suggested in previous assessments and a new, higher estimate of maximum sustainable yield (MSY) – 3,050 mt – has been reported.

The western Atlantic bluefin stock biomass is more than rebuilt.

Quota hikes possible

Using the updated stock assessments, ICCAT scientists substantially changed their management recommendation and said that western Atlantic quota could be increased from the current 1,750 mt up to 2,250 mt as a precautionary catch limit that would not reduce the population through 2019.

Of course, the scientific advice comes with the acknowledgment of some uncertainty and managers must always accept some risk because fishery science is not perfect.

The Pew Charitable Trusts’ response to the new stock assessment has been to focus on that uncertainty and demand no quota increase. However, the notion that fishery managers can somehow not accept risk is unrealistic.

Increased quotas can always be reduced if future stock assessments suggest that this is needed. But quotas set below sustainable levels will result in food production and economic losses that can never be regained.

Recognizing the challenges of responding to groups such as Pew, the American Bluefin Tuna Association (ABTA) recently joined with our western Atlantic industry counterparts in Canada and Japan to call upon the expertise of independent scientists, including Dr. Steve Cadrin, professor of fisheries oceanography with the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s School for Marine Science and Technology.

After reviewing the data, Cadrin explained the low recruitment regime shift situation to the ICCAT Advisory Committee Oct. 9-10, noting the following.

See *BLUEFIN STOCK*, next page

During the recent ICCAT science meetings, a dramatically improved picture of the west and east populations of bluefin emerged. The western Atlantic bluefin stock biomass is more than rebuilt.
