

## Fishermen's Voice January 2010

### Amazing Breakthrough at ICCAT

For the past 19 years, under 5 different U.S. Federal Commissioners, the U.S. ICCAT delegation packs their bags and travels somewhere in the world during the month of November for 10 days or more with one of the major objectives always being to get the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin fisheries under control. For the last 18 years, the Delegation has returned home sometimes with some incremental paper progress and as always "Big Promises".

All this change last month in Recife, Brazil with an amazing bluefin breakthrough with verifiable, substantive evidence of major progress getting the Mediterranean farms under control.

### **The Evidence**

The first concrete sign of progress came from ICCAT scientific group, the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS). The SCRS report reported confidently that indeed 2009 catches would come in some 3,000 mt under quota at about 19,000 metric tons (MT), down from a reported peak catches in excess of 60,000 mt.

The second piece of solid evidence came from ICCAT's Compliance Committee where, under the persistence of Chairman Dr. Chris Rogers, NMFS International Division, the European Community (EC) and most North African countries came clean, confessed to past violations and provided (particularly the EC) solid evidence of measures taken to develop infrastructure to monitor, control and report catches. The EC boasted loudly of the millions of euros spent to finally develop control measures.

In addition, evidence was provided on fines levied against Mediterranean farms and fishermen for non-compliance by an ample army of observers and inspectors deployed by the community and several North African countries.

The premier piece of evidence that we have entered a new era at ICCAT is the fact that two bluefin traps and two farms were forced to release fish already in captivity once it was determined that country quotas had been reached. Ouch! Could be heard from the farm industry that had, in some cases, towed these fish in cages for 30 days from the Gulf of Sidra, Libya to Malta or the Balearic Islands to Cartagena, Spain. The cost to feed and maintain these fish from 6 to 9 months with daily divers and boats fetching feed was substantial and no doubt the sting of financial loss will not soon be forgotten by the farm owners.

### **New Agreement**

Then came the new conservation agreement in Brazil essentially adopting everything the U.S. asked for and certainly every major objective identified in a Senate Resolution authored by Senator Olympia Snowe, Senator John Kerry and other Senators. The U.S. simply asked that the agreement follow the SCRS bluefin scientific advice, although the timing of complete consistency with the advice by the East may be off by one year.

The new agreement calls for an immediate quota reduction from 22,500 mt to 13,500 and with required paybacks the real 2010 quota will be closer to 12,000 mt. The SCRS urged a quota between 8,000 and 15,000 mt. The SCRS also recommended an 11-month purse seine closure and the agreement includes this with elimination of prior loophole "weather" make up days and a switch of the opening only from May 15 to June 15. Finally, and most importantly, the agreement calls for implementation of a

rebuilding plan next year after the new stock assessment that rebuilds the resource with a 60% probability of success by 2023. Most scientists are projecting this will require a further reduction in quota to below 8,000 mt for the 2011 fishing year.

Rounding out the good biological news for bluefin, with the scheduled reduction in western quota to 1,800 mt in 2010, the west is no longer overfishing and the SCRS projections suggest stock rebuilding by 2017 or 2019 depending on the recruitment scenario selected. Thus, there has never been a more productive and constructive year for bluefin conservation than the progress made in 2009.

### **Why the Success?**

So what led to the success in Brazil after the U.S. Delegation struggled for nearly 20 years to get the east and Mediterranean under control? Many think the convergence of a world "spotlight" being shined on the continuing Mediterranean bluefin abuse and high U.S. government level participation and involvement in the ICCAT Brazil meeting produced an irreversible change of course down a conservative path for eastern bluefin.

All give credit to Dr. Rebecca Lent (Federal Commissioner) and Margaret Spring (Dr. Jane Lubchenco's, Chief of Staff) and Senator Snowe's Senate resolution for contributing to the pressure on the east to do the right thing.

No doubt the CITES threat also helped and many are grateful to the contributing environmental groups for finally helping force the European Community to get matters under control.

And most believe the progress made in Brazil is irreversible. In the words of the Chairman of ICCAT, Dr. Fabio Hazin the "days of funny numbers are over at ICCAT".

### **But Why CITES Now??**

Despite the amazing breakthrough at ICCAT, it is clear that the Department of Interior's US Fish and Wildlife Service continues to move forward with a CITES 1 (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna) listing. A CITES 1 listing will ban all international trade. The push for CITES is largely being carried out by PEW Charitable Trusts, World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace and Oceana among other organizations.

But bluefin tuna is not remotely in danger or threatened with extinction. The latest 2008 stock assessment for the East and West suggest 5.2 million fish are prospering in the Atlantic Ocean; more than a million of these of spawning age. This population constitutes enormous reproduction potential and can rebuild the entire Atlantic very rapidly as occurred with swordfish 3 years ahead of schedule.

There has been no suggestion by any mainstream, credible bluefin tuna scientists to the effect that there is any significant level of capability of a fishery or mankind to fish to extinction a species with the reproductive strategy of a highly migratory, highly fecund, widely distributed tuna species such as the Atlantic bluefin tuna.

So why are the environmental groups still pushing CITES? Some observers believe the motivation is to keep the pressure on the East to deliver on the commitment for a rebuilding plan in 2010 while others think they just want the "trophy" of getting bluefin listed after the 1992 failed attempt at CITES by Carl Safina and the Audubon Society from New York.

## **Downside of CITES**

There are serious potential and real problems with a CITES listing and especially if the listing is supported by the U.S. Most importantly, it will undermine U.S. credibility with our partners at ICCAT. After achieving our major biological objectives, what kind of message does it send to then support ICCAT parties being stripped of authority or punished with a CITES trade ban for finally heeding the call to conserve? Why would they take the U.S. seriously again?

A CITES listing will likely force countries to take formal "RESERVATIONS" freeing them from the trade ban obligation which could spread like a western wildfire. Japan has objected 7 times to any CITES listing of any marine species. It is likely that Japanese markets will remain open to BFT if CITES 1 is obtained. Libya, Turkey, Algeria, Taiwan, Philippines, etc. would seek windfall profits to supply shortages from countries likely to abide by the CITES decision.

A CITES listing will likely encourage Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, which ICCAT has been seriously fighting and reducing for years. A CITES listing without considering "similar in appearance species" (the so called "look alike clause") will create a nightmare from an enforcement perspective and lead to a huge increase, part phony part real, of bigeye and yellowfin tuna adding pressure to these stocks.

Meanwhile American fishermen will pay the price for abiding by the law, the science and conserving. We have been doing more, with larger minimum sizes in particular, than any other country to conserve bluefin tuna.

Although the U.S. is a net importer of bluefin our markets cannot absorb the bulk of our production that occurs in five months from June through October. We could be forced to freeze the product and accept a lower value product assuming minus 60 -degree storage freezers become available. Prices would likely crash and economically cripple the fishery injuring commercial tuna fishermen.

And there is the market stigma attached to consumption of a species listed as threatened with extinction. The environmental groups are already having an impact forcing restaurants and retailers to avoid purchasing or placing on the menu bluefin tuna. The swordfish markets, despite the resource being over the biomass producing maximum sustainable yield, still suffers from the Pew led "Give Swordfish a Break" campaign.

The American Bluefin Tuna Association has started an online anti-CITES petition process to help convince President Obama's administration and Members of Congress of the damage that will be done by U.S. support of a CITES listing. With the dramatic progress made by ICCAT this past November, it should be given the opportunity to get the job done. Please take a moment to sign the anti-CITES Petition and pass this link on to all who care about long-term bluefin tuna Atlantic wide conservation. Go to <http://www.petitiononline.com/tuna09/petition.html> to sign the Petition.

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