HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL PACIFIC FISHERIES COMMISSION (WCPFC)

The Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) has several recommendations for the Council to forward to the U.S. delegation to the Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission (WCPFC) on Pacific bluefin tuna, transshipment, albacore management, and North Pacific albacore tuna.

Pacific Bluefin Tuna

The HMSAS recommends that the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Pacific Council) advise the U.S. delegation to the WCPFC that they support the statement of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) Scientific Staff views on the Pacific bluefin that was distributed on the 26th of October 2009 (Agenda Item F.2.a Supplemental Attachment 8).

Transshipment

The HMSAS recommends that the Council should advise the U.S. delegation to the WCPFC to maintain the long-standing U.S. position that the ability for the albacore troll fleet to utilize high seas transshipping should be preserved. The current draft of the transshipping resolution presented by the Marshall Islands could be read as requiring for high seas transshipment and observer on both the fishing vessel and the carrier vessel. This is neither necessary nor feasible for the U.S. troll fleet. The U.S. could agree to placing an observer on the carrier vessel and has indicated this position to the Commission in the past. Requiring an observer on the fishing vessel is not possible due to the nature of the fishery.

Support of the Scientific Program to Support Identification of Biological Reference Points for Albacore Tuna

North Pacific albacore stock assessments are based in large part upon biological data and studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s. The strength of these stock assessments, including associated Biological Reference Points (BRPs), is dependent upon the quality of these early studies.

The HMSAS shares the concerns of ISC fishery scientists that albacore "*vital rates*" (natural mortality, growth, and maturity) may have changed over time due to changing environmental conditions and other factors. Since those early studies, significant technological advances have improved laboratory methodologies that provide greater understanding of the importance of this basic but essential data.

The International Scientific Committee (ISC) Albacore Working Group (ISC-ALBWG) has generated a proposal for a Biological Sampling Plan for North Pacific albacore. It describes a North Pacific Ocean-wide biological sampling program for albacore that would provide the biological sampling, laboratory work and statistical analysis needed to update key albacore biological data.

The HMSAS appreciates that effective albacore management depends in part upon the quality of the science underlying the stock assessments.

The HMSAS recommends that the Pacific Council call upon the U.S. Delegation to WCPFC to seek WCPFC support for the ISC Albacore Working Group (ISC-ALBWG) proposal for a Biological Sampling Plan for North Pacific albacore to refine the vital rates for North Pacific albacore, improve the quality of stock assessments and proceed to secure necessary funding. The HMSAS also recommends if international funding cannot be secured the U.S. should take the lead.

Standardization of Fishing Effort for Management of North Pacific Albacore

The HMSAS would like to reiterate its support for documenting and establishing a standard definition for effort by Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) for the purpose of discouraging significant growth and potential over capitalization of albacore fleets.

However, the HMSAS at this point in time sees this effort as separate from issues related to establishing annual catch limits (ACLs) or catch limits for albacore.

The HMSAS believes that ACLs may not prove to be the best approach to international management of albacore despite the fact that ACLs are the tool of choice for managing our domestic fisheries.

The reasons for this belief is that HMS fisheries are very dynamic and as has been found in other tuna fisheries, the process of establishing catch limits between nations may result in overly precautionary management and result in not achieving optimum yields.

HMS species are wide ranging and follow ocean currents subject to extreme natural variability. The ability to predict where in the ocean HMS species are likely to be available is simply not practical. National quotas as result may be an inefficient tool for realizing the optimum yield of albacore stocks. Further movements of HMS are seasonal and an undivided quota that closed fishing once overall catch levels are reached would have extreme uneven affects on individual fleets that may have access to these fish in different seasons.

The HMSAS notes that albacore stocks are highly productive and that current spawning biomasses are at very high levels, thus current effort does not appear to pose a risk to the fishery. The relative short lifespan albacore combined with its high level of productivity and abundance provides for a highly resilient stock.

The HMSAS has the following recommendations for the Pacific Council to make to the U.S. delegation related to the definition of fishing effort:

- **That the 2002-2004 catch histories provide a good benchmark for a target reference point that coincides with HMSAS prior recommendations for establishing processes that maintain effort at or near current levels with opportunities to harvest those fish.**

- **Support for continued research and funding for that research on albacore stocks and supports a three-year stock assessment cycle noting that albacore is the most important HMS species to west coast fisheries.**

- **Since current levels of effort have yet to be standardized between the RFMOs, that they be standardized no later than the 2011 albacore stock assessment.**

PFMC
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