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Fish and Game Commission



August 15, 2014

Ms. Dorothy Lowman, Chair
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101
Portland, OR 97220

Mr. William Stelle, Regional Administrator
West Coast Region
NOAA Fisheries
7600 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, WA 98115

Subject: Request to Adopt Management Measures for the Pacific Bluefin Tuna
Recreational Fishery

Dear Chair Lowman and Regional Administrator Stelle:

It has come to the attention of the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) that Pacific bluefin tuna is severely overfished. I am writing on behalf of the Commission to request that you immediately take action to protect this valuable stock. The Commission stands ready to take action in state waters, ideally to conform to your actions.

Here are the facts as we understand them:

- Stock assessments have shown that Pacific bluefin tuna is overfished and near historically low population levels, at less than four percent of unfished biomass.
- NOAA Fisheries has formally declared bluefin tuna as subject to overfishing in the Pacific.
- The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) has approved resolutions to reduce bluefin catch and establish annual catch limits.
- Mexico took unilateral action on July 14, 2014 to close both its commercial and recreational fisheries, which is consistent with the IATTC resolutions.
- Neither the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) nor NOAA Fisheries has taken any meaningful conservation action for the recreational fishery in U.S. waters.

- Recent media reports have suggested some displeasure that the IATTC negotiations on more active conservation measures have stalled, and interest has been expressed that actions should instead be taken domestically.

In California, take of Pacific bluefin tuna primarily occurs in the recreational fishery, under a bag limit of ten fish per day, established in 2007 through Federal and conforming state action. State law establishes a possession limit equal to one bag limit. Boat limits also apply, with a multi-day allowance for up to three bag limits at sea under certain conditions. NOAA Fisheries does not have specified possession limits in Federal waters.

Recent activity in the California-based sport fishing fleet includes the following:

- The sport catch made by California-based commercial passenger fishing vessels (CPFVs) last year in Mexico was substantially higher than in recent years, and demonstrates that the fishery can be a significant source of Pacific bluefin tuna mortality. According to PFMC management entity reports, the preliminary 2013 catch estimate is 63,350 fish (totaling 985 MT) for the California-based CPFV fleet alone.
- Following the Mexico fishery closure this summer, effort by California-based sport vessels to target tuna—Pacific bluefin and other species—can reasonably be expected to shift to U.S. waters.
- According to online reports, CPFVs have reported significant success in catching Pacific bluefin in the U.S. In 2014, the four top San Diego landings (Fisherman's Landing, H&M Landing, Pt. Loma Sportfishing, and Seaforth Sportfishing) show combined totals of more than 7,500 Pacific bluefin already landed this year.
- In addition to the CPFV fleet, the California-based private recreational boat fleet has been actively targeting and landing Pacific bluefin off California since July 2014. Although no official catch information is available yet for this sector, anecdotal reports from the California Recreational Finfish Survey indicate that launch ramp activity is reporting extremely high landings of highly-migratory species such as tuna.
- Media reports indicate that the Pacific bluefin tuna fishing is better than it has been in more than a decade, and that effort is shifting from Mexico to U.S. waters.

These facts and conditions have prompted great concern among our Commissioners over the conservation status of Pacific bluefin tuna. We are disappointed by the fact that Mexico appears to have taken more effective conservation measures than the United States, where PFMC and NOAA Fisheries have not taken action to date to address the Pacific bluefin tuna crisis. We do not understand why the Federal government appears to have adopted two very different, inconsistent management approaches for its groundfish and tuna fisheries. Previous groundfish stock assessments showing biomass levels higher than the Pacific bluefin tuna's four percent have prompted your immediate and significant action to curtail or shut down groundfish fishing activity. We are concerned that our collective credibility as fishery managers with the American public will suffer if we do not act quickly to conserve and properly manage the iconic Pacific bluefin tuna.

Dorothy Lowman and William Stelle

August 15, 2014

Page 3

As a co-manager of this fishery resource that occasionally frequents the California coast, the Commission requests that you immediately consider reducing the daily bag limit for Pacific bluefin tuna. Our Commission's policy is to respond to the best available science in a way that ensures needed protections for stocks at risk, and we are guided by the science in developing management measures using a precautionary framework that ensures sustainability. Given the scientific information available at this time, our view is that the current ten-fish bag limit—California's "default" maximum limit for any species of marine sport fish that are not specially regulated—is neither precautionary nor sustainable.

A daily bag limit of one fish, for example, would be a substantial reduction from the current ten-fish limit. Your own data suggest that it also would significantly reduce total catch. However, a limit of one fish would still allow for incidental retention of Pacific bluefin tuna while pursuing other highly-migratory species such as yellowfin tuna and yellowtail. A one-fish incidental catch limit also would minimize bycatch and economic impacts to the recreational fishing industry. Finally, such action would send a strong message to the international community that the United States is willing to cooperate and contribute to conservation measures for Pacific bluefin tuna.

The Commission respectfully awaits your actions and recommendations. We would prefer that you take the lead to address this international issue through Federal action, with subsequent conforming action in State waters by the Commission, as has been our practice as co-managers and partners in conservation. For example, the PFMC recently requested that the Commission take conforming action to close the month of August 2014 to Pacific halibut fishing to ensure domestic limits of this internationally managed stock are not exceeded. The Commission adopted state regulations—now in place—consistent with Federal regulations.

It is our understanding that the PFMC's Highly Migratory Species Management Team met this week to develop management recommendations for the Pacific bluefin tuna recreational fishery to present at your September meeting. Given the Commission's interest that action not be delayed, we invite you or your staff to attend either our October 8th or December 3rd meetings in Mt. Shasta and Van Nuys, respectively, to update us on actions taken to date and to address questions and discuss possible courses of action.

If you have any questions regarding this issue, please contact Susan Ashcraft, Marine Advisor to the Commission, at Susan.Ashcraft@fgc.ca.gov, or 916-653-1803. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Sutton", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael Sutton
President

Dorothy Lowman and William Stelle
August 15, 2014
Page 4

cc: Members, California Fish and Game Commission
Sonke Mastrup, Executive Director, California Fish and Game Commission
Charlton Bonham, Director, California Department of Fish and Wildlife