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A chance to eat swordfish guilt-free could be allowed in the near future

By Bill Shedd - June 23, 2016

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Marlin and other iconic West Coast species of fish and wildlife are needlessly wasted by the use of mile-long drift gillnets on California-based commercial fishing boats. Those nets are targeting swordfish, but indiscriminately catch a whole lot more. As a story in the Register pointed out in 2015, drift gillnets targeting swordfish off the California coast not only catch many marlin as collateral damage, but also kill more dolphins and whales than all other fisheries on the West Coast and Alaskan coast combined.

I happen to love the taste of fresh swordfish, and we're fortunate enough to have a healthy population here along the California coast. So why are we stuck choosing between eating locally caught swordfish and protecting the marine environment?

It turns out there is good news on that front. With leadership from California fishery managers, a better way to catch swordfish could be allowed in the near future.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council – a 14-member panel that manages ocean fishing in federal waters off the coast of California, Oregon and Washington – has a chance to authorize a new commercial fishing method that effectively catches swordfish while drastically reducing the number of marlin and other iconic species that are caught as “incidental catch” in drift gillnets. The system is known as “deep-set buoy gear.” This method of fishing drops hooks as deep as 1,200 feet below the surface to target swordfish during daylight hours while avoiding other species higher in the water column. The gear is actively tended by fishermen, who bring in their catch within minutes of being hooked. By eliminating drift gillnets and adding deep-set buoy gear to the current commercial swordfish harpoon fishery, Californians could enjoy fresh local swordfish from two environmentally safe harvest methods.

After five years of experimental fishing and research, buoy gear boasts a 94 percent marketable catch rate, meaning almost all of what is caught can be kept and sold. Because the fish is landed and put on ice within minutes, buoy-caught swordfish have earned a premium for fishermen who have participated in the experimental fishery.

As president of American Fishing Tackle Co. I lead a company that takes pride in a long tradition of working to protect the ocean resources that support our favorite pastime and our

business. And we're not new to this issue. In the mid-90s, we fought alongside sportfishing organizations to successfully ban near-shore "set" gillnets that were wreaking havoc on local marine resources and held a press conference to release videos to the media of gillnetters in northern Mexican waters catching and throwing back dozens of marlin in a single set – graphic proof of the inherent destructiveness of drift gillnets. Drift gillnet fishermen in California have done their best in recent years to reduce their catch of non-target species, but unfortunately the gear they are using will always result in serious collateral damage.

Now there is a better option, and that's why AFTCO is joining thousands of West Coast citizens to encourage the PFMC to officially authorize deep-set buoy gear as an available option for innovative fishermen. The council, which meets later this month in Tacoma, Washington, should keep on task to authorize this gear by the end of the year – making it available to fishermen by the start of the 2017 fishing season. Representatives from California hold four of the 14 seats on the council and should lead the way toward a more responsible way to catch swordfish.

By authorizing deep-set buoy gear this year, California fishery managers have an opportunity to support healthy fisheries while also protecting ocean wildlife treasured by all of us.

Bill Shedd is president of American Fishing Tackle Company, based in Santa Ana.