

STAFF REPORT: TWELFTH WESTERN AND CENTRAL PACIFIC FISHERIES  
COMMISSION NORTHERN COMMITTEE MEETING

The Twelfth Meeting Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Northern Committee (NC12) took place August 29-September 26 in Fukuoka, Japan. As discussed further below, a significant portion of this period was taken up by a meeting of the just-formed Joint Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC)-WCPFC NC Working Group on the management of Pacific bluefin tuna. Members of the U.S. delegation included, from NMFS, Raymond Clarke (Head of Delegation), Celia Barroso, Tom Graham, and Barry Thom; from the State Department, Michael Brakke; from the Pacific Council, Kit Dahl and Dorothy M Lowman; from Monterey Bay Aquarium, Charles Farwell and Josh Madeira; from American Fishermen's Research Foundation and Western Fishboat Owners Association, Peter Flournoy; from Hawaii Longline Association, Svein Fougner; and from Wild Oceans, Theresa Labriola. James Gibbon from Pew Charitable Trusts also attended as an observer. The official [Summary Report](#) of the meeting is available on the WCPFC website.

The NC adjourned at midday on Monday, August 29, and reconvened in the afternoon as the Joint Working Group mentioned above. The Joint Working Group was established based on correspondence between the NC Chair and the IATTC, and IATTC Resolution C-16-03 (see Attachment 1). The Joint Working Group met until midday on Thursday, September 1 when the Northern Committee reconvened. Masanori Miyahara, NC Chair, and Dorothy Lowman, Pacific Council member, co-chaired the Joint Working Group. Most of the outcomes of the NC meeting entailed the results of the Joint Working Group. The results are summarized below.

### Rebuilding Strategy

The U.S. submitted the same proposals on a Pacific bluefin rebuilding plan and precautionary management framework to this meeting as it had to NC11 in 2015. The rebuilding plan proposal identifies a target reference point of 20% of  $SSB_{F=0}$  to be achieved by 2030, while the current, interim rebuilding target, to be achieved by 2024, is the median SSB 1952-2014, which equates to about 8% of  $SSB_{F=0}$ .<sup>1</sup> Japan, Chinese Taipei, and Korea were unwilling to support adoption of the U.S. proposed target reference point at this time. Much of the discussion revolved around the idea of a “step-wise approach.” In discussion, Japan characterized this approach as first the interim target would be achieved by 2024 and then a more ambitious target would be considered based on an evaluation of the costs and benefits of further rebuilding (the US has proposed a target year of 2030 for the second rebuilding target). Japan may be skeptical that the higher target will produce greater yield and benefits than the empirical-historical interim target of median SSB since this reflects “average conditions” in the post-World War II period. In contrast, the U.S. would prefer a stronger commitment to rebuilding the stock beyond the interim reference point by having the NC begin considering a more ambitious target *before* the interim target is reached. This discussion is encapsulated in the rather mild statement in the Joint Workgroup Report:

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a recommendation from the ISC, it was clarified that this reference point should be specified as the median point value of SSB for the period 1952-2014, estimated to be 40,994 mt from the latest stock assessment. It was emphasized that the reference point is not the nominal value, which is likely to change from assessment to assessment.

*Participants supported the following as part of an ocean-wide rebuilding strategy for PBF: “Recognizing that the management objectives of WCPFC and IATTC are to maintain or restore fish stocks at levels capable of producing MSY, to rebuild the PBF stock by adopting and achieving step-wise rebuilding targets.”*

A careful reading of this statement reveals Japan’s resistance to an explicit connection between the objective of achieving MSY (memorialized in convention texts and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement) and the rebuilding target. That contradiction will likely be a subject of future negotiations.

### Requested Harvest Scenario Projections

As occurred at NC11, rather than taking action to complete a robust harvest management framework, the Joint Working Group spent considerable time identifying further harvest scenario projections for the ISC<sup>2</sup> to produce. (NC11 originated a request that resulted in 11 alternative scenarios and 21 discrete projections reported in the latest [Pacific bluefin assessment](#), see Table 7-3.) The request identifies 10 scenarios to be analyzed (see Attachment D, Annex 2 to the Summary Report). Consistent with the current Conservation and Management Measure (CMM), separate catch limits are identified for fish less than 30 kg and those equal to or greater than 30 kg (informally referred to as small and large fish). Catch limits for Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) fisheries are also identified, which while necessary for the analysis, also reflect that this is a product of the Joint Working Group. (EPO fisheries are subject to IATTC resolutions, not the WCPFC CMM.) Of note, several scenarios identify fishing mortality rate based catch limits rather than constant catch limits as in the current CMM. In particular, scenario 10 comes closest to the methods employed in US domestic rebuilding plans: “Constant F in all PBF fisheries, set at the level at which, for a given candidate rebuilding target, the target is achieved at the end of the rebuilding period [2024] with 60% probability (relative F among fisheries assumed to be unchanged from the most recent 3-year average).” A variety of performance criteria are also identified to assist managers in choosing their preferred rebuilding strategy.

Annex 2 also contains in part 2 what are essentially instructions to managers rather than a request to ISC. It establishes a commitment to “In 2017, agree on a second rebuilding target to be reached by 2030 (not necessarily the ultimate rebuilding target).” But managers would “Revise or adopt conservation and management measures to achieve the second rebuilding target that would become effective after the initial target is met.” This grants a concession to the US in terms of identifying the second target sooner while deferring the adoption of management measures likely to be unpopular with Japan’s domestic fishery stakeholders. Of course, the NC has an uneven record in meeting commitments it has made to take action on elements of a harvest management strategy for Pacific bluefin. Notably, the NC committed to adopting a limit reference point in 2016 but was unable to do so. The Joint Working Group report (as adopted by the NC) states “participants agreed to make progress next year on a precautionary management framework for Pacific bluefin tuna, including specific recommendation for a limit reference point.” Given that the Pacific bluefin stock is currently below any reasonable biomass limit reference point, the need to adopt one may not be immediate; similarly, catch limits are currently established under a rebuilding plan, so

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<sup>2</sup> International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-Like Species in the North Pacific Ocean.

identifying a fishing mortality limit applicable to the rebuilt stock is not an immediate concern. Nonetheless, the WCPFC as a whole has committed, through CMM 2014-06, to adopting harvest management frameworks for “key fisheries.” This puts some external pressure on the NC to more expeditiously to adopt limit reference points for Pacific bluefin as an element of a harvest management strategy for the stock.

#### Revisions to CMM 2015-04 on Pacific Bluefin Tuna

Proposed revisions to the current Pacific bluefin CMM (see Attachment E to the Summary Report) incorporate the commitments elucidated by the Joint Working Group with respect to stock rebuilding; revise the language relating to large fish catch limits to make this a mandatory (rather than voluntary) obligation (paragraph 4); and also with respect to the large fish catch limit, allows the application of a part of the small fish catch limit to large fish catches. This latter provision addresses a problem that Korea is experiencing; it has no large fish catch limit (based on documented catch during the baseline period) but “unexpected large Pacific bluefin tuna catches were made by Korean purse seiners just in a couple of days in March 2016.”<sup>3</sup> Several ideas were floated to address this problem and the discussion touched on a broader objective of shifting fisheries away from small fish and onto large fish, a strategy Japan claimed it is committed to. Korea initially circulated a proposal to change the small fish/large fish threshold from 30 kg to 85 kg based on an observation made in the [ISC16 Plenary Report](#).<sup>4</sup> Japan was opposed to any change in the weight threshold, because it has communicated extensively with its domestic fishery stakeholders about reducing mortality of fish less than 30 kg and it claimed that a change in the threshold would disrupt this effort. The possibility of transferring catch limits between members was also discussed but this approach was also not adopted. The provision to allow the transfer of a portion of the small fish catch limit to large fish catches was ultimately agreed to with some reservations, particularly voiced by the US. To address these concerns, the proposed revisions state that the NC will review this provision in 2020 (based on ISC analysis) and decide whether to continue it beyond then.

Japan floated [a proposal for a so-called “emergency rule”](#) to be incorporated into the CMM. This was an elaboration of a proposal from 2015 that would use the Japanese troll CPUE index (a key index in the stock assessment) to prompt action if index values (a proxy for recruitment) fell below the lowest historically observed value for three years running. If this threshold is breached the proposal states “CCMs shall tentatively reduce its catches of Pacific bluefin tuna by X% for two years from 1 January of the following year.” The US opposed the proposal as presented for several reasons. First, the US recommended that if the index were to be used directly in management (especially to prompt substantial automatic cuts) it should be subject to some form of external peer review. Second, the US questioned whether the lowest observed index value (level of recruitment)

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<sup>3</sup> According to Korea, 460t of large fish were caught in three days by 16 vessels, which was deemed “unexpected and unthinkable.” Korea also noted it will voluntarily reduce future catches to account for this overage, reflecting consensus that the proposed transfer scheme cannot be applied retroactively.

<sup>4</sup> The ISC noted “It is recognized that the threshold of 30 kg (in CMM 2015-04) is less than the size/age at which 50% of the fish are sexually mature based on the maturity ogive used in the assessment.” If the intent of the measure were to reduce fishing mortality on immature fish then the threshold should be increased; 85 kg is the size/age at which 50% of the fish are sexually mature.

is the most appropriate trigger. Third, the procedural aspects of the measure did not seem well thought out and coordinated with the stock assessment schedule. Finally, the response to a triggering event (three years running of unprecedented low recruitment) was not clearly specified (although Japan likely expected that the language would be the starting point for negotiation on the specifics). Japan was apparently unwilling or unable to make changes to address US concerns and dropped the proposal.

### Other Matters

Japan has been a proponent of a catch documentation scheme (CDS) for Pacific bluefin and proposed establishing a working group to advance its development. The US emphasized that any such scheme be consistent with the broader effort on catch documentation being undertaken by the WCPFC. (WCPFC has established an intercessional working group on this matter; its third meeting is scheduled for September 16-17.) Japan floated terms of reference for a working group on a Pacific bluefin CDS but this was not adopted; instead, the Joint Working Group report states this topic will be taken up at its next meeting.

Japan voiced its desire to host a stakeholders meeting on Pacific bluefin rebuilding. After some discussion about the logistical aspects of such a meeting it was agreed that the ISC would jointly sponsor the meeting with Japan and terms of reference for the meeting were adopted (Attachment D, Annex 3 to the Summary Report). ISC will present the results of the rebuilding strategy scenarios evaluation (discussed above) and “facilitate discussion on selection of the next rebuilding target.” The meeting is slated for April or May 2017 in Japan.

Although the meeting was almost entirely taken up with Pacific bluefin, there was some cursory discussion of the North Pacific albacore management strategy evaluation (MSE). John Holmes, ISC Albacore Working Group (ALBWG) Chair, presented a [progress report on the MSE](#). It was noted that the Second ISC MSE workshop was held May 24-25, 2016; workshop participants and the ALBWG developed a set of six management objectives for the initial MSE evaluation. Based principally on an intervention by the US, “it was noted that the proposed set of management objectives are expected to be revised/changed as information from simulation testing is evaluated” so there is some latitude for further engagement by the Council on this topic. The NMFS SWFSC has hired an MSE analyst who will take over leading the North Pacific albacore MSE process in conjunction with the ALBWG Chair. A third workshop was proposed, focusing on acceptable risk and how it is used in the evaluation of management objectives.

The NC agreed that next year’s meeting will be held in Korea (likely Busan), and to the general principal of alternating the meeting venue between Japan and another member (to date the meeting has only been held in Japan). The US proposed hosting the meeting in 2019, likely in Honolulu. The NC Chair, Masanori Miyahara, was reelected for another two-year term as was Michael Tosatto as Vice Chair. The next Joint Working Group meeting was proposed in conjunction with NC13 in September 2013, although there was some discussion about scheduling meetings to alternately coincide with WCPFC (NC) and IATTC meetings. But since the 2017 IATTC meeting venue is Vanuatu, this scheme was deferred until the IATTC meets in an EPO country.

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