

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) has reviewed materials included under Agenda Item J.5 (Recommendations for International Management Activities) and Agenda Item J.4.a, Supplemental NMFS Report (Joint Report between the National Marine Fisheries Service [NMFS] West Coast Region [WCR] and Southwest Fisheries Science Center [SWFSC] on Amendment 4: Clarifying and Specifying Biological Reference Points) and has the following comments to offer to the Council:

Agenda Item J.5 contains two items discussed by the HMSAS. The first concerns the multi-annual rebuilding plan for Pacific bluefin tuna. A recent report suggests that the spawning stock of Pacific bluefin tuna continues to be at a low level at about 3 percent of their pre-exploitation spawning biomass stock size. More than 66 percent of the commercial harvest of Pacific bluefin tuna is by Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

HMSAS members are concerned about the low spawning stock status of the Pacific bluefin tuna. We are dismayed that there is no effective rebuilding plan in the Western Pacific. There are also continuing problems with monitoring and enforcement.

The HMSAS believes that the U.S. must take a strong approach to maintain the current international total allowable catch (TAC) with better enforcement and monitoring in the Western Pacific. The U.S. needs to strongly recommend that the regional fishery management organizations (RFMOs) develop and implement a reasonable rebuilding strategy. The HMSAS recommends a time-area closure of the spawning grounds and the reduction of the take of the zero to one year size class.

Pacific bluefin tuna have been an important part of the commercial and recreational fisheries inside the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the West Coast for over 100 years and every effort should be made by the U.S. to ensure that the stock recovers in the minimum time necessary so that historical fishing patterns may be resumed.

The second topic discussed by the HMSAS is the results of the February 2017 Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) meeting, which are described in Agenda Item J.5.b, Supplemental NMFS Report. The HMSAS notes that the conservation measures for bigeye, yellowfin, and skipjack tuna for 2016 were essentially adopted with minimum changes for 2017. This means that U.S. longline vessels measuring more than 24 meters (79 feet), and operating out of Hawaii and California, will be limited to a total allowable catch of 500 metric tons of bigeye tuna. This is unchanged from 2016. The U.S. initially proposed increasing the total allowable catch (TAC) of bigeye tuna for U.S. longline vessels over 24 meters to 750 metric tons but this proposal was not adopted by the IATTC. Because the bigeye stock is not overfished nor is overfishing occurring, the HMSAS recommends that the U.S. request a bigeye TAC in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) of 750 metric tons for the vessels in excess of 24 meters.

Finally, the HMSAS has recently become aware of the apparent expansion of some Asian fishing fleets into the temperate waters of the EPO and this has resulted in numerous gear conflicts and dangerous, close-quarter maneuvers by members of these Asian fishing fleets. Observations by U.S. vessels (longline and albacore) in the EPO of increasing numbers of Asian fishing vessels in areas not previously observed are troubling and it seems likely that the harassment will increase in the future. We believe that it is the responsibility of all nations and vessel operators to conduct safe operations and not endanger other vessels working in the area.

The HMSAS also requests that the Council reassess its budget commitment to ensure there will be sufficient funds to send commercial fishermen representatives to the International Scientific Committee Management Strategy Evaluation Albacore workshop which will be held in either Canada or Korea in 2017.

PFMC
03/11/17