

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Swordfish can be caught without killing other fish

BY BILL BOYCE
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California's recreational fishing community has made significant changes to ensure sportfishing remains sustainable. We've decreased catch limits, increased minimum size restrictions, rid inshore waters of harmful gillnets and helped finance white sea bass hatcheries.

But change in the West Coast commercial drift gillnet fleet has stalled.

In a major reversal, federal officials recently abandoned plans to limit the number of dolphins, sea turtles, and whales injured or killed by this indiscriminate gear.

So it's important that the Pacific Fishery Management Council take definitive action this week to help transition the commercial swordfish fleet from drift gillnets to deep-set buoy gear. Six years of cooperative research between scientists and commercial fishermen clearly demonstrates that buoy gear consistently delivers high-quality swordfish with far less harm to sensitive species.

The numbers make the case. More than 50 percent of the animals caught by mile-long drift gillnets are dolphins, whales, turtles and unmarketable fish species, known as bycatch. Because drift gillnets are left in the ocean overnight, much of the bycatch is dead or injured. In contrast, deep-set buoy gear is far more precise, boasting a 90 percent marketable catch rate. And because buoy gear is actively tended, swordfish are landed quickly and immediately put on ice, resulting in higher-quality fish that bring higher prices.

The commercial drift gillnet fleet is fairly small – fewer than 20 active boats – which means transitioning to deep-set buoy gear is both timely and manageable. And California is the only place in the United States where fishermen are allowed to use large-mesh drift gillnets.

Recreational anglers have done their work to ensure a sustainable future for billfish and sharks. Now it's time for the council, particularly its California members, to ensure commercial fishermen can take a cleaner approach to catching swordfish.

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