

## SUPPLEMENTAL NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE (NMFS) REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ACTIVITIES

This report provides a summary of two meetings that occurred in June 2021: the North Pacific Albacore (NPALB) Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) U.S. Stakeholder Meeting and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) 97th Extraordinary Meeting.

### **NPALB U.S. Stakeholder Meeting**

The International Scientific Committee on Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean (ISC) recently completed an MSE on NPALB. The ISC Albacore Working Group hosted a meeting among U.S. and Canadian stakeholders from March 22-25, 2021, to review the results of the MSE. As a follow-up to the ISC meeting in March 2021, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office and West Coast Region hosted a U.S. stakeholder meeting on June 1, 2021, to provide an opportunity for U.S. stakeholders to express their priorities and consider future management of NPALB.

NMFS solicited input on various topics related to the MSE, including next steps for development of a harvest strategy. NMFS' goal for this meeting was to solicit stakeholder input to develop a common harvest strategy for NPALB, with a focus on prioritizing the management objectives, reference points, and fleet controls evaluated in the MSE. NMFS also solicited input on a timeline for development of proposals to the IATTC and Northern Committee (NC). Below is a list of topics and general comments received.

- *The interim Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) harvest strategy for NPALB, and whether it should apply to the IATTC*
  - In 2017, the WCPFC adopted an interim harvest strategy for NPALB ([HS-2017-01](#)), which includes the following objective: "...to maintain the biomass, with reasonable variability, around its current level in order to allow recent exploitation levels to continue and with a low risk of breaching the limit reference point." Noting that the IATTC has not adopted a management objective for NPALB, NMFS solicited input on this objective as a starting point for receiving input on objectives for the fishery. Stakeholders generally supported the objective, and stated that it could be helpful to explicitly define "reasonable variability" (e.g., 10-20%) and "low risk" (e.g., 5%). Stakeholders expressed an interest in having a consistent harvest strategy across the Pacific Ocean (i.e., in both the IATTC and WCPFC).
- *Prioritization of management objectives evaluated in the MSE*
  - Because the MSE allows stakeholders to evaluate the degree to which different harvest control rules met different management objectives, NMFS asked participants to prioritize the objectives evaluated in the MSE. There was general agreement that the most important objective is ensuring that the spawning stock biomass is maintained above the limit reference point (LRP), followed by maintaining fishing intensity at the target reference point (TRP) with reasonable variability. Several stakeholders also felt that any management changes should be relatively gradual.

- *The general harvest control rule (HCR) analyzed*
  - Stakeholders expressed support for the HCR, noting that inclusion of a threshold reference point (ThRP) could allow for more gradual changes in management before reaching the LRP.
  
- *Reference points for the HCR*
  - Stakeholders supported establishing an LRP and ThRP in a manner that allows for gradual management changes to recover the stock above the ThRP. There was general agreement that a LRP of 7.7% of unfished spawning stock biomass (SSB<sub>0</sub>) was not acceptable. Participants indicated a ThRP between 20% SSB<sub>0</sub> and 35% SBB<sub>0</sub> would be acceptable. There was not a strong preference for a target reference point of F40 or F50,<sup>1</sup> but stakeholders noted that F40 had only been breached once during the 20-year reference period.
  
- *Catch or mixed controls for the fleets*
  - The MSE evaluated whether all fleets in the eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) would be managed under total allowable catch (TAC), or under a mixed approach whereby longline fleets are managed under TAC and surface fleets are managed under total allowable effort. There was general support among participants for a mixed control approach, although there were questions on whether effort controls were feasible and could be implemented domestically.
  
- *Timeline/considerations for development of a proposal*
  - Some participants noted they are still uncertain about the MSE results and the details of a future harvest strategy, while others urged making progress this year. Those interested in making progress this year suggested proposing a harvest strategy at the NC meeting this year. However, it was recognized that other priorities in the IATTC and WCPFC (e.g., tropical tuna management), as well as the virtual format of the meetings could prove challenging (i.e., both the IATTC and WCPFC would likely be focused on tropical tunas while also meeting virtually).

### **97<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the IATTC**

The IATTC virtually convened an [Extraordinary 97th meeting](#) on June 7-10, 2021, to focus on options for tropical tuna management because the current Resolution on tropical tuna management ([Resolution C-20-06](#)) expires at the end of 2021. The U.S. delegation was led by Ryan Wulff (NMFS WCR) and David Hogan (U.S. Department of State), and included U.S. commissioners to the IATTC, members of industry and other stakeholders, and members of the U.S. government. Members discussed five proposals, including [one sponsored by the United States](#). Most of the proposals included additional measures to address increasing purse seine sets on fish aggregating devices (FADs) and impacts to bigeye tuna in the EPO. Options put forward in the proposals

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<sup>1</sup> F[X] represents a fishing intensity (F; calculated in terms of spawning potential ratio) that leads to a SSB that fluctuates around X% of the unfished SSB (e.g., F40 would result in a fishing mortality that would remove about 60% of the unfished SSB)

included country-specific set limits on FADs, increased days for EPO purse seine closures, individual vessel catch limits for bigeye tuna, and an operational rule to adjust closures on both FAD sets and unassociated sets each year based on the number of FAD sets in the previous year. While progress was made towards reaching agreement on some elements, members required additional time to internally process some of the proposals. Ultimately, the IATTC did not reach consensus on a new tropical tuna measure and will continue the discussion at the plenary of the 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the IATTC scheduled for August 23-27, 2021. This meeting is expected to be virtual. The IATTC did agree to extend the current Acting Director's (Jean-François Pulvenis's) term for an additional six months, or until a new Director is selected, whichever comes first.