HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) reviewed the Situation Summary, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reports, and supplemental materials under Agenda Item G.2, International Management Activities and offers the following recommendations and considerations:

Pacific Bluefin Tuna (PBF)

The HMSAS appreciates the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) support in ensuring in-person participation at the 3rd Intersessional Meeting of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC)-Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Northern Committee Joint Working Group (JWG) on the Management of PBF to be held March 11 - 13 in Newport Beach, California. There is a lot at stake in this year's JWG negotiations as countries are working to finalize the long-term harvest strategy and must agree on new conservation and management measures in the IATTC convention area.

We recommend the Council forward to the U.S. delegation the following. The HMSAS emphasizes that negotiating through the JWG process is the only way to ensure the future stability and viability of U.S. commercial and recreational fisheries for PBF. We urge the U.S. delegation to collaborate with JWG Members to make progress on the long-term harvest strategy at the 3rd Intersessional meeting, with intention to adopt the long-term harvest strategy in July 2026. We reiterate the following:

Core Principles for U.S. consideration of a long-term harvest strategy:

1. The U.S. should not accept anything less than a 70:30 (West – East) allocation of fishing effort to align with the historic access to the fishery by countries in the Eastern Pacific Ocean.
2. Primary objectives of the long-term harvest strategy should be to
   (a) maintain and increase the spawning stock biomass above current levels (and the 2nd rebuilding target)
   (b) prevent overfishing (according to commonly used reference points) and
   (c) limit the catch of small fish (particularly age-0) in the Western Pacific Ocean that are critical for stock conservation
   (d) ensure stability for Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) fisheries
3. Recruitment uncertainty continues to be a significant concern and any long-term harvest strategy must be paired with efforts to address the recruitment index and additional conservation measures (in the form of exceptional circumstances) that are responsive to evidence of low or declining recruitment trends. The improvements to the recruitment index and additional conservation measures to respond to changes in recruitment need to be in place as soon as possible, and no later than 2027 to align with the current scheduled stock assessment for PBF.

4. Recreational fishing should not be included within management measures or country quotas until all countries with significant landings from recreational fisheries demonstrate accurate monitoring, reporting and controls of their recreational fisheries, consistent with the measures currently adopted and enforced in the U.S. Support monitoring and oversight of recreational fisheries for PBF throughout the range of the stock.

Specific considerations for the selection of a harvest control rule (HCR):

1. HCRs 9 – 16 support a 70:30 West/East allocation and should the basis for negotiations.
2. Within HCRs 9 – 16, priority should be given to those that prioritize safety and allow for stability in the short to medium term, similar to HCR 10. This HCR will provide an adequate buffer between the threshold (ThRP) and limit reference point (LRP) and will incentivize action to maintain the stock at or above current levels of spawning stock biomass.
3. Do not support any HCRs that do not include an LRP.
4. Do not support HCRs 5, 6, 7,13, 14 or 15 that have high risks related to safety and significantly increase catch of WCPO small fish.
5. Develop additional measures to be included in the HCR that will reduce catch of small fish and specifically age-0 fish if/when the stock status breaches the ThRP and moves toward the LRP.

The HMSAS notes that the U.S. commercial quota continues to be under-utilized primarily due to market conditions. We are encouraged by the emerging commercial hook and line fishery but note that other gears, particularly purse seine, buoy gear, and new experimental gears would like to explore additional fishing opportunities for PBF.

The HMSAS notes that the recreational fishery for PBF enjoyed another successful year in 2025 with roughly 53,000 fish being harvested. Interestingly, there was a significant uptick in smaller fish (12-15 lbs.), particularly later in the year. We believe this provides further evidence of strong recruitment in recent years and the need to ensure further measures to protect Age-0 fish.

The HMSAS continues to support leaving management of the recreational fishery separate and distinct from the commercial fishery for PBF. The recreational fishery for the U.S., since 1990, has been managed by bag limits. In 2015, in response to the overfished status of the stock, the recreational bag limit was reduced from 10 fish to 2. For purposes of complying with our reporting obligations, we convert that number into an estimate of metric tons based on the average size of the fish harvested that year. In recent years, the average size of PBF caught in the recreational fishery went up considerably. For example, in 2023 the average size PBF landed by the Southern California Charter boat fleet was roughly 60 pounds. So while the reported tonnage of the U.S. recreational fishery is significantly higher, that is a result of the fish being significantly larger in recent years.

The HMSAS notes the current IATTC Resolution on PBF (C-24-02) does not address management of the stock beyond 2026. We have confidence progress will be made during the Intersessional meeting and are looking forward to the June Council meeting when we expect to have recommendations for international management of the PBF stock in 2027 and beyond; followed

by our recommendations for domestic implementation of an IATTC Resolution on PBF during the November Council meeting.

North Pacific Albacore – U.S. Canadian Treaty (Treaty)

The Treaty remains the governing bilateral framework for reciprocal fishing and port access privileges. Appendix A provides a high-level background summary of the Treaty and prior regimes for the benefit of Council members and other interested parties. The immediate issue is whether the Parties can or should negotiate a regime for 2026 and beyond that is both timely and operationally meaningful for the fleet.

The State Department hosted a January 2026 stakeholder call on the Treaty and has initiated the process to seek authorization to negotiate terms of a regime for 2026 and beyond. An additional Stakeholder meeting was held on February 9, 2026. A number of HMSAS members participated in these calls.

The HMSAS was unable to reach consensus on the propriety of a regime this year. Those in favor of a regime highlight the benefits of port access for maintenance and crew purposes, an ability to access the stock should distribution shift to the north, and the fostering of long-term relationships between the fleet(s). Those not supportive of a regime point to the disproportionate benefits to Canadian harvesters in terms of catch, improved markets, less crowding on the water, alternate options for picking up crew, and a general feeling is distrust following the October 2022 Canadian proposal and the 2024 regime agreed upon in May of 2024.

If, however, a regime is considered, it should be evaluated not simply on whether it can be implemented in a timely manner, but on whether it provides clear operational value to the U.S. fleet and fishing communities. That includes practical port access, workable hail-in/hail-out and related administrative requirements, and terms that do not create unnecessary burdens for U.S. vessels fishing in or transiting through Canadian waters. Timeliness remains a central consideration, absent exceptional circumstances, an agreement on a regime needs to be executed on or before March 31, 2026.

The HMSAS emphasizes the need to include a formal agreement regarding attribution of catch and/or effort between the United States and Canada. If there is a regime this year, this should be required.

North Pacific Albacore – Harvest Strategy

The HMSAS appreciates that NMFS convened the February stakeholder webinar to gather input in advance of upcoming international discussions on North Pacific albacore management. Several details remain undetermined and participants wanted more time to consider the use of spawning potential ratio (SPR), and other attributes before weighing in on any proposal to revise the existing harvest strategy. The HMSAS notes a planned May NMFS workshop intended to further consider these, and other important, details. The fleet needs to better understand the potential impact(s) to the U.S West Coast fleet resulting from effort controls versus catch controls and how this process

will benefit U.S. harvesters. The HMSAS expects to provide more detailed recommendations on the Harvest Strategy during the June Council meeting.

The HMSAS recommends the following:

- **Continuation of the 2002–2004 baseline for effort controls**; and
- **Continued stakeholder engagement with the fleet in advance of this summer's International meetings**

South Pacific Albacore

As of March 6, 2026, the majority of the U.S. South Pacific albacore (SPA) surface fleet based on the west coast are returning from the grounds and reported a very poor season.

The HMSAS notes the adoption of the SPA Harvest Strategy (HS) through WCPFC's CMM 2025-01. 2026 will be significant for the development and adoption of measures to implement the agreed upon HS. Critical to that will be how allocation will proceed and how the two commissions will coordinate their work.

The HMSAS supports the United States engagement in the implementation and allocation discussions that will shape the availability and character of future seasonal access for the U.S. surface fishery under the new HS. Upcoming meetings on this include:

- the First WCPFC and IATTC Joint Working Group on the Management of South Pacific Albacore Tuna Fisheries will be held on March 17–18, 2026 Pacific time. The Joint Working Group will review the terms of reference, provide an overview of the stock and existing management, prepare for the 2027 stock assessment, review the provisional workplan and meeting schedule, and adopt advisory recommendations.

- The First South Pacific Albacore Allocation Workshop is scheduled for June 25–26, 2026 in New Zealand.

The Council's November 2025 recommendations were transmitted through appropriate channels, including the Permanent Advisory Committee process. Those recommendations emphasized preserving meaningful seasonal access for the U.S. troll fleet, limiting transferability of opportunity, and recognizing differences between longline and surface gears as implementation measures are developed. Those considerations remain relevant as the South Pacific albacore process moves forward.

The HMSAS recommends the Council continue urging active U.S. engagement in the implementation and allocation phase of the South Pacific albacore process, including the March Joint Working Group and the June allocation workshop, while emphasizing that implementation choices should account for the interests of the U.S. surface fleet that has a long history of participating in this fishery that benefits U.S. West Coast fishing families and the need for coherent management across WCPFC and IATTC processes.

PFMC
03/07/26

APPENDIX A – U.S. -CANADA ALBACORE TREATY BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

The HMSAS acknowledges that many Council members and other interested persons could benefit from a background document on the *Treaty Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of American on Pacific Coast Albacore Tuna Vessels and Port Privileges* (Treaty).

The Treaty was signed in 1981, amended in 2002, and codified by law in 2004. There have been subsequent Amendments to the Treaty, in particular to Annex C which addresses the limitation regime (discussed in more detail below). The Treaty allows vessels from either nation to fish for albacore tuna (NPA) in waters of the other seaward of 12 miles from shore. It also allows vessels to use certain ports within the other nation to obtain supplies and services and to land fish. The Treaty also calls for annual data exchanges of information related to activities permitted under the Treaty.[1]

While the Treaty is the guiding document formalizing the relationship, a limitation regime (Regime) covers specific restrictions applicable to each Party[2]. Historically, a Regime lasted 3 years. Items enumerated in a Regime include:

- The term of the Regime.
- Definition and descriptions of "fishing season" and "port access season".
- Limitations on the number of vessels allowed to access the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the other nation.
- Regime termination language triggered by international or domestic management measures.

For a multitude of reasons, the Parties could not agree on the terms of a Regime covering the 2012 season. As a result, U.S. NPA fishermen could not fish in Canadian waters nor access Canadian Ports; and vice-versa.

Before the 2013 fishing season, the Parties were able to come to agreement on a new Regime. Of note, the Regime:

- Shortened the fishing season for Canadian vessels in the U.S. EEZ to cover June 15 – September 15. This to avoid conflicts when the U.S. fishery transitioned to a bait fishery.

- Reduced the number of Canadian vessels allowed to access the U.S. from 110 to 45 vessels. This to address the numerous complaints about on-the-water behavior.

Since then, 3-year Regimes were agreed upon covering the 2014 – 2016, 2017 – 2019, and the 2020 – 2022 fishing seasons. On October 31, 2022, the Canadian Government submitted a

[1] Appendix A to the current HMS SAFE document replicates information provided during the 2024 Data Working Group's Data Exchange

[2] Annex C is negotiated and amended with each regime.

Proposal on a Pacific Albacore Tuna Treaty Access Regime beyond 2022. The proposal included the following changes:

- Increase the number of Canadian vessels authorized to fish in the U.S. EEZ and access designated ports to 110 (from 45).

- Increase the length of the fishing season for Canadian vessels in the U.S. EEZ to October 31, to match the season for American vessels in Canada's EEZ.

- Flexibility on the overall length of replacement vessels, and,

- Modified text on the requirement to collect and share catch and effort data to ensure the provision of accurate information on fishing activity in the other Party's EEZ.

The Parties failed to reach an agreement on a Regime for the 2023 fishing season.

In May of 2024, the Parties announced a one-year Regime that rolled over the terms of the prior Regime (2020 – 2022).

There was no regime in 2025 due to a pause on legally-binding negotiations implemented with the Administration change.