

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON RECOMMEND INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

International Activities

The Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) comments on international management activities point out that (to our understanding) the only international activities between now and the November Council meeting is the Pacific Advisors Committee (PAC) to the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) in October.

Concerning North Pacific (NP) albacore, management is progressing on the Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) process with a NP albacore MSE workshop scheduled for March 5-7, 2019 in Yokohama, Japan. The HMSAS requests that the Council set aside funds to send two industry representatives to the NP albacore MSE workshop in Yokohama.

One point concerning NP albacore is the revelation at the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and the Northern Committee is that China is sending ten longline vessels into the North Pacific to harvest NP albacore. The Chinese action would be new harvest effort of NP albacore and violation of the WCPFC conservation management measure that says nations fishing NP Albacore shall not increase their effort above the average effort of the years 2002 to 2004.

Blue Fin Tuna

The HMSAS notes that the stock of Pacific bluefin tuna (PBF) continue to be at a low level (3.3% of unfished biomass in 2018) but that recent (2016-2017) recruitment appears to be much better than in previous years and the stock is projected to improve substantially (to 6.7% of unfished biomass) by 2024. The total U.S. catch of PBF has averaged about 750 metric tons (mt) recently if all catch sectors are accounted for.

The HMSAS notes that in 2017 the International Scientific Committee (ISC) reported that the total Pacific-wide catch of PBF was more than 14,000 mt (SC14). The HMSAS believes that the U.S. must receive an equitable share of the total PBF catch and suggests that if the PBF catch is divided equitably the Western Pacific Ocean (WPO) would receive about 60% of the total catch limit and the Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) would receive about 40% of the total catch limit. Further, in the EPO the HMSAS believes that Mexico should receive 60% of the EPO catch limit and the U.S. should receive the remaining 40%. The ISC has projected a 2019 Pacific-wide catch limit at 12,397 mt. If the catch limit was divided equitably as suggested above, the U.S would receive 1,983 mt in the EPO and Mexico would receive 2,975 mt. A U.S. catch limit of 1,983 mt of PBF would allow all sectors in the U.S. fishery to continue to fish for this extremely valuable species at a conservative, but slightly improved, level. Further, an increase to about 1,900 mt would likely make the management burden for U.S fisheries agencies substantially less than previous and should reduce or eliminate the situation that occurred in 2017 when the U.S. exceeded its catch limit.

Looking further out, and assuming that the conservation measures currently in place continue and that recruitment is normal, it is anticipated that the PBF stock will recover to about 260,000 mt by 2034 (ISC PBFWG 2018 stock assessment).

Noting that the peak U.S. catch of PBF was more than 15,000 mt and U.S. catches in the 1980's and 1990's were on the order of 2,000-5,000 mt, the HMSAS anticipates that an equitable distribution of future catch limits, as described above, would provide the U.S. with a robust fishery for PBF and that fishery would, with proper management, include all fishing sectors.

The HMSAS would like to recognize these indications that bluefin stocks appear to be rebuilding and would like to note that at the recent Northern Committee meeting, Japan and Korea made proposals to increase allocations for bluefin without resolution and no increase was recommended for 2019.

In 2017, U.S. landings exceeded the 425 mt annual limit with total landings of 486 mt with 25 mt daily trip limits. In 2018, the year to date landings are at 35 mt with 1 mt trip limit for U.S. Commercial Vessels except a 2 mt trip limit for large mesh drift gill net vessels. It is anticipated that the total U.S catch will be under the biennial 600 mt quota for 2017/2018.

HMSAS requests the Council to recommend that National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) continue to press in all international forums for a more equitable allocation of current and future increases of any bluefin allocation. This should include a reevaluation of East/West allocations under the management of the IATTC and WCPFC as well as the allocation in the EPO between the U.S. and Mexico. We would request the Council ask NMFS to prepare detailed analysis of the historic U.S. catch record to support these efforts. An increase to the U.S catch limit would help with in season management of U.S catch effort.

The HMSAS notes the recent IATTC decision to set the U.S. catch limit of bluefin tuna to be 600 mt for 2019-2020.

The HMSAS recommends the following regulatory framework;

- 300 ton annual catch limit.
- Reduce daily trip limit to 15 mt until 250 mt is reached annually. Thereafter, trip limit will be reduced to 2 mt for all gear types.
- Any shortfall or excess in 2019 allocation of 300 mt to be credited or debited to the 2020 allocation of 300 mt.
- If the U.S exceeds the 300 mt in 2019, the fishing can continue on a two-ton limit until 425 mt is reached. In year 2020, we will need to develop tighter communications among fisheries management and close the fisheries in a timely manner to ensure that catch does not exceed biennial quota limit.