



Marlin Management Workshop

Date:

Friday 23rd November 2012

Location:

MPI Auckland Fisheries Office, Avondale

Attendees:

Arthur Hore	Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI)
Silver Bishop	MPI
Dominic Vallieres	MPI
Stephen Brouwer	MPI
Graeme McGregor	MPI
Jerry Garrett	International Game Fishing Association (IGFA)
Richard Baker	New Zealand Sports Fishing Council (NZSFC) / IGFA
Charles Hufflet	Solander, New Zealand Japan Tuna Company (NZJTC)
Peter Ballantyne	Solander, NZJTC
John Holdsworth	NZSFC
John Chibnall	NZSFC / IGFA
Sheryl Hart	New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council
Craig Davidson	Leigh Fisheries
Dave Kellian	Leigh Fisheries

Introduction

Arthur Hore welcomed the group and explained the context for the meeting. The meeting stems from a commitment within the HMS Fisheries Plan to review the management of marlin and facilitate a workshop where commercial and recreational interests can share their views. MPI presented background information on the current state of the fishery along with some of the key management changes that have led us to this juncture.

The discussion on the day frequently moved from one subject to the next. The comments below have been grouped under general subject headings rather than the chronological order in which they were presented.

State of the stock

The latest south west Pacific stock assessment for striped marlin (2012) estimates the current biomass of marlin at about 6,000 tonnes, overfishing was not occurring in 2010 but the stock is approaching an overfished state. Gamefish data was presented that suggested catch rates (average of one marlin every five days fished by charter boats in east Northland) might soon become untenable to game fishers if marlin biomass is reduced further. Both sectors agreed

that the international fleet of 1,350 vessels fishing for southern albacore was the key risk to future levels of marlin biomass.

Minimising Waste

Commercial operators stated that their primary concern is one of wastage where dead marlins are being returned to the sea. Perfectly edible fish is being wasted and commercial fishers are foregoing potential income at a time when the economics of fishing are difficult on operators.

They also argue that it is a conflicting situation to the waste issues surrounding other species where operators could find themselves forced to land sharks with no market and dump marlin where demand does exist.

The commercial sector estimates that the current fleet catches approximately 25 t of marlin annually and admits that existing official figures likely underestimate the totals because of poor reporting from operators. They argue that those 25 t are currently lost to all sectors and could enhance the New Zealand economy as a whole.

Survival of releases

Commercial operators suggest that about 40% of marlin arrive on the boat dead but that this ratio can increase with increased water temperature. Observer reports however indicate that 75% of marlins are alive.

Recreational representatives suggested that commercial operators should be making more effort to avoid caching marlins and questioned whether there was any information available on the effects of soak times.

Commercial operators responded that operational constraints don't allow them to change soaking times. However, they also suggested that depth was more likely to influence catch rates with deeper sets catching fewer marlins. MPI noted that there was some information available on the timing of when fish take the bait which could provide some insight into survival.

Commercial tagging

The comment was made that tagging of marlin by the commercial sector is limited and sector awareness should be increased especially in light of the existing commercial regulatory obligations to tag and release all marlin taken alive in NZ fisheries waters.

The commercial sector admitted that uptake of tagging is limited and that few operators were aware of the regulations. They recalled that an official notice was distributed at some stage when tags were no longer supplied. MPI will review the existing regulations to make sure that they reflect our current information needs and don't contradict other regulatory measures.

Preventing targeting

Commercial operators stated that STM is not a known target species anywhere in the region and that there is currently limited markets for STM but one could be further developed if supply could be guaranteed which is good for New Zealand as a whole. They also stated ongoing verbal arrangements that ‘should the commercial domestic fishery start to be realised then there should be a renegotiation’.

The recreational sector strongly believes that opening up the commercial fishery will undoubtedly expand the effort to new areas where “accidental” bycatch will likely increase. They also do not believe that operators will behave responsibly or that MPI can effectively monitor any controls placed on the commercial sector. They pointed to overlooked agreements where MPI was unable to prevent the fleet targeting swordfish. Commercial operators stated that, unlike swordfish where the use of glowsticks drastically increased catch, there is no immediate way to target marlin.

MPI suggested options were available that would enable commercial fishers to land a limited number of dead marlins while still limiting any potential increase in effort or risk to the stock.

For example consideration could be given to allowing landing of dead marlins only on those occasions where an observer is present. The recreational sector had serious reservations to this primarily given the existing observer coverage and this is a feasible option only when 100% observer coverage is achieved; currently coverage in the longline fishery is approx. 9%.

Commercial operators suggested that a vessel based limit could be considered whereby every vessel would have an allocation of STM that they could land based on their expected bycatch and the survival rate of those fish. The current fishing year was proposed as a benchmark to determine appropriate bycatch levels. MPI stated that information on bycatch levels was already available and an additional year’s worth of data would add little value.

However, there was still a fear by recreational representatives that the domestic fleet could seek out opportunities to increase bycatch levels of marlin and by fishing in the summer in areas where marlin were more available as longliners do in Australia. Increased investment in the longline fleet will also occur as target species such as southern bluefin tuna continue to recover.

Recreational sector took the view that the current status of marlin meant that we should not be considering more flexible management options.

Removing the commercial gain incentive that would lead to targeting and was suggested by redistributing the income from the sale of marlin to the recreational sector. MPI reminded the

group of the earlier comments regarding expenses incurred by the commercial sector as some of the potential factors that would complicate this scenario.

MPI asked if recreational controls should also be a part of the discussion and the group generally agreed that STM management should cover all sectors but that the immediate priority was commercial. Recreational fishers have applied a voluntary minimum size for marlin since 1988. Landed marlin less than 90 kg do not count for contests or trophies. The recreational sector has consistently tagged and released in excess of 50% of all marlin captured.

Protecting Key Recreational Species

The recreational view is that the existing agreement already came at a significant cost to the sector with the loss of swordfish and any further concession would be seen as a further loss. International trends are towards recreational only utilisation of marlins and that position is supported here as well. Information was provided on the new Billfish Conservation Act in the US that reflects the high value of recreational fishing for marlin and bans the importation of marlin to mainland USA. Recreational fishers want New Zealand to adopt a similar position as the USA and take a similarly strong and firm line in respect of marlin with their participation in international management processes.

Commercial operators noted that overlap with recreational fishing grounds is unlikely and also that commercial fishers tend to fish at different depths to their recreational counterparts which may further weaken the potential impact on availability.

Recreational representatives reminded the group of the offshore fishing by foreign licensed fleet which had a significant impact on the availability of fish to the recreational sector.

The commercial sector on the other hand believe that the issue is not in New Zealand waters and efforts should be aimed at controlling catch in the Pacific especially when considering the recent reduction in the size of the domestic fleet. They argue that albacore fleets on the high seas are the highest influencing factor on the stock. It was noted however that the high seas commercial effort in the area north of New Zealand isn't occurring during the peak of the STM migration.

Fishing on the High Seas

Incidents of marlin being targeted by some operators on the high seas were described. The current exemption for landing of marlin from the high seas was seen as a loophole by the recreational sector which allowed some operators to flaunt the domestic restriction.

Commercial operators in attendance were surprised that vessels would deliberately target the species based on the economics of landing a lower value species but recognised that recent incidents warranted a closer look.

MPI will investigate the high seas permit conditions that are currently applied to determine if these operators were in breach and whether the conditions themselves need to be revised.

The recreational sector position is to seek to extend the ban on commercial landing of marlin to the high seas and across all vessels regardless of flag.

Controlling Imports

The recreational sector is also advocating for a ban on the import of marlin into New Zealand based on sustainability concerns for the stock and in line with the international trend to remove it from the menu. This move would also support initiatives of other recreational bodies operating overseas.

The commercial sector argues that the import of marlin is a non-issue with minimal quantities reaching New Zealand. They consider any import restrictions are not appropriate and could compromise New Zealand's position with trading partners and the WTO. The question was also raised as to why consumers of seafood from retail suppliers should not be able to enjoy this species.

Recreational fishers reject the claim that an import ban, such as the one recently implemented in the USA, would affect trade with New Zealand or put us in breach of WTO rules and suggest that there is a distinction between highly migratory species that are widely available outside of New Zealand waters and the inshore species which we export.

Next steps

MPI will follow up on the issues raised in discussion and present the group with updated information and possible scenarios for consideration. Members are asked to reflect on the meeting as the basis for discussion for the 2013-14 Annual HMS Operational Plan and look for ways to develop action items that can be addressed in the coming year.

The recreational sector agreed with the proposed approach but stated that any recommendation made must be in the context of keeping the existing regulations.

Commercial representatives also endorsed the approach and share the overall concern for the stock. They also accept that marlin is a species of significance for the recreational sector.

The group will look to reconvene around April 2013.