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1st August 2011

NZ Sport Fishing Council Submission on the Proposed increase in the Pacific bluefin tuna allowance for recreational catch.

NZ Sport Fishing Council

1. The NZ Sport Fishing Council (NZSFC) formerly NZ Big Game Fishing Council is a national sports organisation. Membership from affiliated clubs has grown steadily and we now represent over 30,000 members in 59 clubs spread throughout NZ. We run the NZ Nationals fishing tournament, which has evolved over time and remains successful.
2. NZSFC compile and publish the New Zealand records for fish caught in saltwater by recreational anglers. NZSFC is affiliated to the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) which records and publishes catches that qualify as recreational world records.
3. In 1996 the NZSFC helped establish the NZ Marine Research Foundation, which aims to sponsor research on marine species and fisheries for the benefit of all New Zealanders, including participants in ocean recreation. The Council and Foundation have contributed to Pacific Bluefin tuna satellite tagging projects alongside Stanford University, University of Auckland, Blue Water Marine Research and MFish.
4. Many of our most established fishing clubs have a focus on fishing for large pelagic species such as marlin, tuna, and sharks. In recent years our membership has expanded beyond the traditional deep sea angling clubs to include many local clubs targeting inshore species.
5. NZSFC have engaged in the management of highly migratory species (HMS) for many years, particularly since the mid 1980s which saw the introduction of the Billfish Moratorium. This was followed by the Billfish Memorandum of Understanding with

New Zealand Sport Fishing Council Inc.

(Previously New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council Est. 1957)

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commercial fishing interests. More recently we have been actively involved in the development of the draft HMS Fisheries Plan.

Recommendations

- ⇒ NZSFC supports the proposed increase in recreational allowance from 1 t to 25 t for Pacific bluefin tuna,
- ⇒ NZSFC ask that an option of maintaining the current TAC and reducing the TACC by 24 t be offered to the Minister in the Final Advice Paper.

The proposals

6. The Ministry proposes to increase the recreational allowance to 25 t and the TAC to 145 t, with a slight increase to 3.5 t to allow for other sources of fishing related mortality. It is not proposed to change the allowance for customary fishing, since there is no new information to suggest customary catches (if any) exceed the customary allowance.

Table 1: Management options proposed by Mfish

Option	TAC	Recreational allowance	Customary allowance	Other sources of fishing related mortality	TACC
Option 1 – status quo	120	1	0.50	2.5	116
Option 2 – Increase TAC and recreational allowance	145	25	0.50	3.5	116

The fishery and current allowances

7. Pacific bluefin tuna is believed to be a single Pacific-wide stock and is covered by two regional fisheries management organisations, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC). They cooperate in the management of the Pacific bluefin tuna stock throughout the Pacific Ocean.
8. Pacific bluefin tuna was not widely recognised as a distinct species until the late 1990s. It was previously regarded as a sub-species of northern bluefin tuna. Prior to June 2001, catches of this species were either recorded as northern bluefin tuna or misidentified as southern bluefin tuna. New Zealand commercial catch peaked in 2003-04 at about 60 t, but for the last 4 years it has been closer to 15 t mostly caught on tuna longlines.
9. Pacific bluefin tuna was introduced into the QMS on 1 October 2004 with a TACC of 116 t and a recreational allowance of 1 tonne. Since about 2004 a recreational fishery for TOR has developed off the west coast of the South Island associated with the hoki fishery. Voluntary reporting by recreational charter boats give a high catch of 59 fish and 17 t landed in 2008. There were also 145 TOR released that year. This was not a complete record but included most of the main vessels.

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The Fish

10. Adult Pacific bluefin reach a maximum size of 550 kg and lengths of 300 cm. Maturity is reached at 3 to 5 years of age and individuals live to 15+ years old. Spawning takes place between Japan and the Philippines in April, May and June, spreading to the waters off southern Honshu in July and to the Sea of Japan in August. Juvenile Pacific bluefin migrate to the eastern Pacific as far as California and Mexico. Relatively little is known about the distribution of Pacific bluefin in the South Pacific.
11. Pacific bluefin of 270 to 300 kg produce about 10 million eggs but there is no information on the frequency of spawning. Pacific bluefin caught in New Zealand recreational fishery are adults that appear to be in poor (post spawning) condition. They arrive off Hokitika in mid-August and leave about mid-September.
12. They have been tracked with satellite tags for up to 6 months and disperse into the Tasman Sea and East of New Zealand tending to move south as the water warms in summer. The Council and New Zealand Marine Research Foundation have contributed to Pacific Bluefin tuna satellite tagging projects alongside Stanford University, University of Auckland, Blue Water Marine Research and MFish. Total expenditure and voluntary time for the 42 fish released with electronic tags would be in excess of \$900,000. The first peer reviewed scientific paper is due out in 2011.
13. The numbered tether used to attach a satellite tag on 19 August 2008 was recovered from a Pacific bluefin on 18 August 2010 just 22 nautical miles southeast of the tagging location. The fish measured 256cm in length with a girth of 196cm and was estimated to weigh 310kg on recapture. So some fish return seasonally to the feeding grounds off Westport and Greymouth.

NZSFC submission

14. Discovering a new recreational fishery for large species anywhere in the World is a rare event. Such a fishery needs to offer something special in order to attract fishers from many countries, who will endure an often difficult open water passage to get the chance of catching the fish of a lifetime. The Pacific bluefin fishery off the West Coast of the South Island is that kind of rare opportunity. It is challenging on many levels. Starting with crossing the West Coast river bars, steaming up to 50 nautical miles off the coast in winter at 40° S in the Tasman Sea. It is a 24 hour fishery with the best bite often at night, hard in behind the hoki trawlers as the net surfaces. The hook ups can be swift and the fights long, using heavy tackle in heavy seas, attached to powerful tuna that don't tire easily in cold seas.
15. The fish are spectacular, a worthy challenge for any angler, wire man, or skipper. This recreational fishery is unique for this species. Nowhere else can anglers reliably target adult Pacific bluefin.

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16. The August and September fishery provides an important boost to the West Coast economy. Currently there is a project to investigate and recognise the key factors relevant to the development of an industry centred on recreational game fishing on the West Coast. The project is jointly sponsored by New Zealand Trade and Enterprise and Development West Coast. (contact mwrightconsultant@gmail.com).
17. NZSFC has worked for several years to get Pacific bluefin accepted by the International Game Fish Association as a saltwater line class species for world records. This has now been approved and all world records for this species are held in New Zealand (IGFA 2011).
18. NZSFC will promote tag and release of Pacific bluefin caught by recreational fishers but some fish are kept for personal or record purposes. Anglers should ensure that fish kept and weighed are fully utilised, as with most other sport fish species.
19. No bag limit is proposed for Pacific bluefin. This is supported by NZSFC. There is a convention on most boats in the recreational fishery that one fish between four or five anglers per trip is plenty. The rest should be tagged.
20. There were very few adult Pacific bluefin tagged and released anywhere in their range before the West Coast fishery started. These tuna do survive tag and release well with all 42 fish tagged with satellite tags surviving while the tags were attached. As well as the recapture mentioned in the section above, there have been three fish recaptured with conventional tags, two short term and one that could have been from a previous season judging by the condition of the tag. No release information was lodged for that tag number.
21. NZSFC supports Option 2 to increase the allowance for recreational take and a slight increase in the allowance for incidental mortality. The actual recreational landed catch has probably exceeded 20 t in some years. The proposed new allowance will cover the existing catch. This fishery has struggled with poor weather over recent seasons. With the potential for a longer West Coast hoki season (due to increased quotas) and calm weather an allowance of 25 t could be caught in some seasons.
22. On the other hand we note that the commercial quota was set at a level that has never been caught and probably never will be, in New Zealand waters. Given the current concern about the sustainability of the Pacific bluefin tuna stock as a whole and New Zealand's international obligations, we would like to see an option provided to the Minister to allow for the 25 t for recreational fishing interests within the existing TAC of 120 t. The result would be a 20 % reduction in commercial quota which may be a problem for some individual fishers, who catch most of their ACE. However, there would be a \$19,000 reduction in cost recovery levies per year across all quota holders.

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