



29 November 2021

Hon. David Parker
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Dear Minister

Tuna depletion in Pacific and New Zealand waters

We are writing collectively to express a widely held concern about some tuna stocks that were once abundant in New Zealand. Southern bluefin tuna was fished down to about 5% of the unfished spawning stock but hard work by New Zealand delegations and the Commission for Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), and resulting enforcement actions, have seen this tuna stock return to New Zealand in good numbers and large sizes.

Similarly, the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council (NZSFC) has previously raised concerns about the decline and virtual absence of yellowfin tuna in New Zealand over the last 20 years with Fisheries New Zealand, Ministers, and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). New Zealand is on the southern edge of the natural range of yellowfin tuna and what we have seen is contraction of the summer range of yellowfin tuna caused by excessive catch and high juvenile mortality in internationally purse seine fisheries in tropical waters. This decline in abundance devastated the domestic New Zealand commercial fishery, and the recreational sport fishery, for the species.

The NZSFC and commercial tuna fishers (Talley's and Pelco NZ) have been regularly meeting in the interest of better tuna management. Collectively, we are now extremely concerned about the ongoing decline in skipjack tuna in New Zealand waters. Skipjack, like yellowfin tuna, have a southern range that extends to New Zealand. They are the most exploited tuna species in the world, with an annual worldwide catch of over 2 million tonnes per annum. They are highly productive, and vital to the oceanic food chain as predator and prey. They are of significant economic and cultural value to both tropical and sub-tropical nations in which the species inhabit, and of economic value to foreign nations beyond their natural range that fish international and tropical waters. Recent catches and observations of skipjack tuna have been half of the levels seen between 2000 and 2015, and still

further decline is being noticed with observations and catches this year being particularly concerning, arguably the worst to date.

All stakeholders, Talley's, Pelco NZ, and our recreational representative organisations, are deeply concerned.

Continued declines adversely impact recreational interests, increase competition and conflict between the commercial and recreational sectors, and may render the commercial and recreational fisheries for this species uneconomic, as was witnessed with bluefin and yellowfin tuna in recent decades. Indeed, we have already witnessed vessels leave the commercial fishery due to economic pressures.

This subject was discussed during a recent IGFA Oceania meeting that NZSFC representatives attended along with representatives from Australia, Papua New Guinea, and New Caledonia. Attendees agreed that the presence of skipjack in their waters had indeed declined over the last 20 years. Industry has been voicing the same concerns to Fisheries NZ, suggesting that the declines in skipjack abundance observed in New Zealand are being mirrored in many other nations domestic waters (e.g. Japan, Hawaii, and above) that exist on the fringes of their natural range.

We consider that intense fishing pressures in tropical waters are resulting in a range contraction of skipjack tuna and driving these decreases in local abundance.

A major agenda item for the upcoming WCPFC meeting (starting online 29 November 2021) is the revision of the conservation and management measure for bigeye, yellowfin and skipjack tuna stocks (CMM 2018-01). There will be proposals to reduce restrictions on the use of fish aggregation devices (FADs) to increase the purse seine catch of skipjack. This will also increase the bycatch of a wide range of species including juvenile yellowfin and bigeye tuna.

Covid restrictions have meant there has been no independent observer coverage of tuna fishing and transshipments for 18 months, and the WCPFC has lost most of the limited controls that were in place.

We urge the Government and the New Zealand delegation attending the upcoming WCPFC meeting to ensure that:

1. FAD restrictions remain an integral part of the revised CMM;
2. The overall catch of skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye tuna in the WCPFC area is not increased; and
3. Any additional mechanisms to better balance and manage international competition over this global species should also be employed as available.

We consider that concerted and bold action is required to help protect skipjack tuna stocks in the waters of various domestic nations that are outside of the primary (tropical) fishing region but are absolutely part of the species natural migratory range. This would require a refocus and re-emphasis on protecting the skipjack fisheries of New Zealand (and its territories), where this species is a key part in our South Pacific culture, identity, and economy.

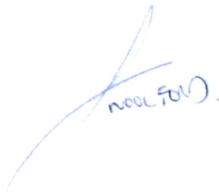
Yours sincerely,



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