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## Prized Atlantic Bluefin Tuna May Be Endangered

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WASHINGTON (CN) - The Atlantic bluefin tuna, among the most prized food fish in the world, may be threatened or endangered, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service. The agency is launching a one year full status review to determine if fish should be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Worldwide management of the fishery is a collaborative effort of signatory nations to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), which announced in 2009 that stocks of the species had declined by 72 percent in the eastern Atlantic and 82 percent in the western Atlantic since 1970 and ordered substantial reductions in catch by member countries.

Earlier this year, the U.S. led a bid to ban international trade in bluefin, but the effort was scuttled by the largest consumer of the species, Japan, at the ICCAT conference in Doha, Qatar. Even if the ban had been passed, the ICCAT conference relies on the voluntary adherence of its members and has virtually no independent enforcement mechanism.

The agency's listing review is in response to a petition submitted by the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity shortly after the Doha ICCAT meeting.

The center contends that "Atlantic bluefin tuna suffers from mismanagement by an ineffective international organization, rampant illegal fishing as a consequence of extraordinary market demand, complicated and poorly

understood population dynamics, and a diversity of habitat threats."

The petition also points out that the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico occurred during spawning season in the only known spawning grounds of the western Atlantic stock, which is likely to have a significant impact on species numbers.

Pressure on the tuna population from fishing is at least matched by pressure from warming of the earth's oceans, degradation of spawning grounds and dwindling genetic stock of the species, which the center says has made it more susceptible to disease.

The center also argues that government agencies have taken contrary actions, contrasting the U.S. efforts at the Doha ICCAT conference with the National Marine Fisheries Service's proposal to lengthen the season and daily retention limits to exploit allowed catch limits under the ICCAT treaty, even though the agency knew that the 20 year rebuilding program upon which season

limits and take were based had done nothing to rebuild the species population.

The bluefin is a long lived species, the western Atlantic stock reaching maturity after eight years and four to six years in the eastern Atlantic. When allowed to reach maturity, the tuna average nearly 800 lbs. and stretch to over eight feet in length. The largest ever caught during a

game fishing tournament was almost 1,500 lbs.

The agency requests input on the species from the scientific community, the fishing industry, environmental groups and the general population.



Bluefin tuna. (Getty images).