

Fishermen fight tougher tuna regulations

By Doug Fraser
Cape Cod Times

Last week's decision by the National Marine Fisheries Service to review a petition to list the Atlantic bluefin tuna as either threatened or endangered drew a harsh response from U.S. Sens. John Kerry and Scott Brown, and U.S. Reps. Barney Frank, John Tierney and William Delahunt.

"This decision comes at the worst possible time for our fishermen," Kerry wrote in a press release protesting the decision.

He said the federal government should be working on a meaningful international agreement to stem rampant overfishing by European countries instead of focusing on the domestic fishery, which has been tightly regulated for decades.

The congressional delegation argued that the state's fishermen are already under regulatory pressure to bring back stocks of cod, haddock and flounder and can't afford to lose such a valuable species. Bluefin tuna are highly prized by the Japanese sashimi and sushi market and can net fishermen thousands of dollars per fish.

"We should be looking at ways to help our fishermen get back on their feet «» instead of burdening our already-struggling fishing industry with even more job-killing regulations," Brown wrote in the press release.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition for the endangered species listing with fisheries service in May. Citing stock assessments, global warming and the recent Gulf oil spill, the center asserted that both the European, or eastern Atlantic, and the U.S., or western Atlantic, stocks of bluefin were critically endangered and faced the immediate risk of extinction.

Largely because of Europe's lackluster efforts at reining in overfishing and bringing more accountability and enforcement into their management, the U.S. supported a failed attempt by Monaco and other countries to institute an international trade ban on bluefin.

But Andy Baler, president of Nantucket Fish in Chatham and Dennis, and a bluefin tuna exporter to Japan, said the environmentalists are behind the curve. Eastern Atlantic fish become sexually mature in just four years and could potentially recover quickly under new European regulations that cut the quota by more than 30 percent this year, and

reduce it further if there is biological evidence the stock isn't on the road to recovery.

Baler, who also serves as an adviser to the international organization that regulates bluefin, said the Europeans also significantly improved monitoring and enforcement.

"Those numbers in and of themselves have made a huge difference," Baler said. Bluefin can, and do, swim across the Atlantic, and Baler said scientists believe as much as 70 percent of the fish here may come from the European stock. He said conservation measures over there will pay off big for our fishery as well.

"Give this five years, and you'll be walking on tuna," he said.

The fisheries service has a year to gather information and make a decision on the endangered species listing.

Kim Damon-Randall, endangered species coordinator of the agency's Northeast Region, said there is uncertainty among scientists about why western bluefin have not recovered despite strict quotas. Scientists, she said, are not sure whether it is environmental conditions or not enough large spawning fish to boost the stock size.

Baler called the ongoing effort by environmentalists to get a ban on bluefin a "witch hunt."

He estimated that, despite 1,200 active permits, there were around 20 boats from Chatham and Harwich and 30 others in ports north to Maine that did the heaviest fishing on bluefin. These boats have to be big enough to go 100 miles or more out to Georges Bank where tuna are now.

"What we do is not going to impact anything," Baler said. "Commercial fishermen need this to survive. We're not endangering the recovery of these fish. It's going to recover."

