

'Endangered' tuna call launched

By Richard Gaines
Staff Writer

NOAA move comes despite 'rebuilt' stock, sightings

NOAA's Office of Protected Resources begins a series of listening sessions next week as part of a process leading to a May decision on whether the giant bluefin tuna should be protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Such a finding would essentially shut down a recreational and commercial fishery with a base in Gloucester and New Bedford that experienced unprecedented concentrations of bluefin of all sizes on Georges Bank for the last two years, industry backers say.

Yet, many environmental groups and journalists insist the extinction of the bluefin is virtually assured.

The most recent stock assessment of the two stocks — eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean and western Atlantic — by the scientific committee of the International Commission for the Conservation of Bluefin Tuna (ICCAT) made a guardedly positive finding, and recommended that more than 14 million tons could be caught in the next year without slowing the rebuilding regimens.

At its Paris meeting last fall, ICCAT set the total allowable catch for the eastern stock at 12.90

metric tons, a 9.5 percent contraction, and the western stock — including New England and the rest of the East Coast — at 1,750 metric tons, a 2.9 percent reduction.

The cutback in the Western catch limit was encouraged by Jane Lubchenco, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's chief administrator, even though ICCAT's scientific research arm published a 2010 stock survey showing the western Atlantic stock of bluefin is completely rebuilt, based on a model employed by ICCAT for the past 12 years.

Lubchenco explained that she was hewing to a different model that gave a less optimistic opinion on the status of the great fish.

The meetings open in Sandy Hook, N.J., next Wednesday, move to Boston on Thursday, Jan. 6, then shift to Portland, Maine, on Jan. 7, and conclude in Pascagoula, Miss., and Beaufort, N.C., on Jan. 10 and 11, respectively.

The Boston meeting is scheduled for 10 a.m. at the Mariners House, 11 North St., in the city's historic North End.

A status review team from NOAA has been assigned to gather and

analyze data for submission to Patricia Kurkul, the Gloucester-based regional administrator of NOAA Fisheries.

The report will be peer-reviewed before Kurkul writes a recommendation that then proceeds up the NOAA chain of command to Commerce Secretary Gary Locke.

The review process was triggered by a petition filed with the secretary by the Center for Biological Diversity, which specializes in defending wild places and endangered species — and even offers "endangered species condoms" to help slow the growth of the human race — the species most responsible for endangering the rest of the life forms, according to the center.

The Center for Biological Diversity's petition was determined last September to warrant a formal status review.

The outcome is required by May, a year from the initial filing, which was made soon after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and is based to a large extent on the assumption that the spill will have a crippling effect on the bluefin which spawns in the Gulf of Mexico.

"The oil spill occurred in the midst of the Atlantic bluefin tuna's spawning season, guaranteeing devastating impacts on eggs, larvae and adults," the center asserts in its petition to NOAA for Endangered Species Act protection for the tuna.

"Commercial fishing for Atlantic bluefin populations, in combination with a rapidly changing ocean environment, is likely to drive bluefin tuna to extinction," the center said.

The Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Association sees a very different picture.

In an e-mail to the Times, the association noted that U.S. fishermen account for less than 5 percent of the bluefin catch in the Atlantic, and that "endangered species" protection from the U.S. would only close down the U.S. fisheries, allowing ICCAT to redistribute the U.S. allocations to other nations.

Moreover, the association said in a letter in the November issue of National Fisherman that the petition would harm the U.S. fishermen who "have sacrificed for many years by complying with the U.S. rules, which are more stringent than those of other countries.

"Endangered species listing will permanently damage our coastal communities with the loss of thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenues," the organization said in the publication, National Fisherman.

Lubchenco's urging a reduction in the western Atlantic fishery in bluefin tuna drew widespread angry U.S. reactions last month, including from U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe, a Maine Republican.

"By suggesting that reductions in total allowable catch of bluefin tuna are warranted in both the Eastern and Western Atlantic, NOAA is effectively selling out U.S. fishermen who for years have adhered to strict catch limits and conservation measures now proven to have boosted the health of the bluefin population," Snowe said.

"Our fishermen operate under the world's strictest management regime, and their sacrifices are largely responsible for the optimism found in the most recent scientific assessment for western Atlantic bluefin," she said. "The U.S. fishery lacks the rampant over-harvest, under-reporting and tuna ranching operations that have led to such a dramatic decline in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean ... To suggest our fishermen should be punished ... is uncalled for and inappropriate."

NOAA has asked participants in the listening sessions to call to RSVP due to security and space concerns. The contact person is Kim Damon-Randall at 978-282-8485 or kimberly.damon-randall@noaa.gov.

The sessions will also be available on the Web; those interested should also contact Damon-Randall