

## Scientists fear ‘dangerous precedent’ for bluefin

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Scientists who follow the controversial Atlantic bluefin tuna management process say a “dangerous precedent” could be set next week when a working group convenes in Montreal to discuss the latest stock assessments in advance of a quota-setting meeting this fall.

During a conference call on Thursday organized by Pew Charitable Trusts, Dr. Susanna Fuller, coordinator of Marine Conservation at the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, said bluefin tuna quotas in Canada are “very, very political.” Canada is a member state of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), which annually determines fishing quotas for Atlantic tuna species.

“We’re concerned about the scientific model [that ICCAT follows] and how it impacts our recovery process,” said Fuller. “We are concerned that Canada will ask for more quota.”

Canada, she noted, has also put Atlantic bluefin tuna through its species-at-risk process, which could result in an endangered-species listing. It’s counteractive, she said.

“Canada asked for more quota from ICCAT [last year], the same department working on an endangered listing,” she said, referring to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. “It’s a bit of hypocrisy in our own government.”



Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Mass., argued that ICCAT should keep quotas low to allow spawning biomass to increase in key areas like the Gulf of Mexico. The organization should not, he added, raise fishing quotas adhering to an “unsubstantiated hypothesis,” pushed by proponents for higher quotas, that spawning stock cannot increase due to environmental factors like climate change.

“Why does it matter whether bluefin tuna are more productive? It’s a highly vulnerable species, slow-growing, late-maturing and an indicator of conditions in the Atlantic. It’s iconic, and it’s extremely valuable. It’s an indicator of how we treat marine resources generally. Follow the science and keep quotas low and allow the stock to recover and think about what that means for other resources,” said Rosenberg.

“Our conclusion is that you really want to follow the risk profile and take a lower-risk decision. If you reduce quota, there will be a short-term loss in catch. But that will be quickly replaced because of increased recruitment.”

Last year, ICCAT set a quota of 13,500 metric tons (MT), up from just 12,900 MT in 2012. The Western Atlantic portion is only 1,750 MT, which is shared between Canada and the United States. Canada argued for 2,000 MT but was denied.

Rich Ruais, executive director of the American Bluefin Tuna Association and a member of the U.S. delegation traveling to Montreal next week, said he’s concerned that U.S. government and NGO scientists will “go overboard, as they usually do.”

“First of all, the request for lower quotas by Pew is preposterous in the face of the last several stocks assessments for the western and eastern Atlantic that show the biomass is steadily increasing,” added Ruais. “There is no justification for any further reduction, only justification for an increase, particularly in the west. We have suffered the most and taken the greatest reductions since 1981. We’re way out in front of the east in terms of conservation. The stock biomass is getting larger. These are facts. What Pew is trying to do is hang on to a few threads of a propaganda campaign, making it difficult for us to get a respectful share.”

Ruais argued that a quota of 2,500 MT for the United States and Canada, which is actually lower than a 2,650-MT level that he says will still ensure maximum sustainable yield, is more than a reasonable request. But

it will probably fall on deaf ears, he said.

“[Fishermen] were not counted in the process,” he said. “The U.S. government, in particular, does not seem to have any problem injuring fishermen in an economic sense. It’s unfortunate.”

ICCAT will set quotas for 2014 this November when it gathers in Cape Town, South Africa, said Amanda Nickson, global tuna conservation director for the Pew Environment Group.

“The key area of controversy is to what degree the population can rebuild,” added Nickson, whose group reported this week that the Western Atlantic bluefin tuna population is only 36 percent of what it was in 1970. Nickson said the Montreal meeting next week, held from 26 to 28 June, will be “fundamental” to the quota-setting process.

“We are going to see interest in exploring the viability of an unproven hypothesis [to raise quotas] from Japan, which is interested in a higher supply of bluefin,” said Nickson, adding that a bloc of countries in northern Africa will also be present in Montreal and will be interested to see if a precedent is set for raising quotas based on “problematic data that is not supported by peer-reviewed science.”

Pew also jumped on a 19 June Federal Register notice that estimated more than 500,000 pounds of bluefin tuna were killed and thrown back into the water in 2012 by the tuna and swordfish longline fishery, a total that would represent about one-fourth of the allowable total bluefin tuna harvest.

“Despite bluefin tuna’s value for the ocean ecosystem and as food, industrial fishing results in tons of this magnificent fish being wasted — literally thrown over the side of the boat,” said Catherine Kilduff of the Center for Biological Di-

versity in San Francisco. “Indiscriminate fishing gear costs bluefin tuna, dolphins, whales and sea turtles their lives, an excess that our ocean can no longer afford.”

Ruais said the U.S. government has failed in its mandate to minimize bycatch under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

“We’re clearly disturbed about the discards. It warrants a response from [the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Fisheries Service]. They could be sued and should be sued,” he said. “When fishermen have to go into discard mode, it’s a crime, it’s a bloody shame. It’s a waste of a beautiful product that could feed thousands of humans. Instead, it goes down as red crab bait.”