

The San Diego
Union-Tribune

California's bluefin tuna drowning in a sea of politics

By Catherine W. Kilduff

April 17, 2015

California should shut down its Pacific bluefin tuna fishery. That's something conservationists have been demanding for years, citing evidence of severe overfishing – and now even state regulators say they want to temporarily stop fishing of this prized but imperiled sport fish. But federal rules and interagency politics are getting in the way of smart fishery management.

Frustrations bubbled over during a brief but remarkable California Fish and Game Commission hearing April 8. At issue was a proposal to reduce the bag limits for recreational fishing – which takes far more Pacific bluefin tuna than commercial fishing – from the current limit of 10 fish down to two. The proposal was unanimously approved by the commission, but not before two commissioners vented frustrations that the new restrictions didn't go far enough.

Commissioner Michael Sutton opened his remarks with a reference to his advocacy for protecting endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna; he said he fears the Pacific bluefin stock is being similarly depleted. "If it were up to me," he said, "with a 4 percent biomass left, we would shut this fishery down."

Scientists estimate that the Pacific bluefin tuna population is down to just 4 percent of its unfished natural population. Commissioner Richard Rogers voiced similar desires, comparing Pacific bluefin to the passenger pigeon, a once-abundant bird that's now extinct due to overhunting.

"To me this is a patent case for shutting off all bluefin tuna, both commercial and recreational," said Rogers. "Ordinarily, with this degree of biological evidence, you would shut it off. Any other fishery where we have control, anything terrestrially, any mammal, any bird, we would shut it off. We would be listing. It would be done."

But despite stating strong convictions that California should stop bluefin tuna sportfishing for now, both Sutton and Rogers said they didn't feel they had the authority to do so.

"I don't think we have any choice but to adopt our rules in conformance with what the federal council recommended," Sutton said of the recommendation from the Pacific Fisheries Management Council, the industry-dominated regional advisory body that Congress created through the Magnuson-Stevens Act to govern the nation's fisheries. "It's tempting that we act to be stricter," he said.

“The politic thing to do right now – in deference with the way the department is interacting with the feds – is to go along with this,” Rogers said.

But when an important species is being threatened with extinction due to its popularity with sushi lovers and recreational fishing expeditions, the “politic thing” may not get the job done. It’s time to take decisive action to save the imperiled Pacific bluefin tuna.

The Fish and Game Commission claims the revised rules could reduce the recreational bluefin catch off California’s waters by 32 percent. That would have translated into saving 1,752 fish in 2013, according to California Department of Fish and Wildlife figures. Those figures also indicated that recreational fishing boats pulled an astounding 63,185 Pacific bluefin out of the waters surrounding California and Mexico in 2013.

The Center for Biological Diversity, where I work, last year petitioned the federal government – the National Marine Fisheries Service – to close the Pacific bluefin fishery, and the service is overdue in responding to that petition. Instead, the agency is expected in the coming days to accept the Pacific Fisheries Management Council recommendation to adopt the two-fish bag limit, just like California.

The science is clear that the Pacific bluefin deserves stronger protections. People are catching on: More than 80,000 consumers and restaurants have signed a pledge to boycott bluefin. But we need state and federal governments to have the courage of their convictions and shut down this fishery.