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Tuna Commission 2014-2017 Measures Are Driven by Allocation, Not Conservation

HONOLULU (06 January 2014) Both the Hawaii-based US longline fishery and the US purse-seine fishery that operate in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) were among those fisheries obliged to accept further fishing restrictions at a recent Pacific tuna commission meeting.

The Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission (Commission), of which the United States is a member, met in Cairns, Australia, in the first week of December to adopt various conservation and management measures (CMMs). Chief among them was a new measure for tropical tunas, namely skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye tunas. In 2008, the Commission had adopted a three-year measure for yellowfin and bigeye for the years 2009-2011. This measure was continued in 2012 and 2013, but the Commission was unable to develop a subsequent comprehensive multi-year measure until this year.

Despite being unjustly cast as the villain in the negotiating process, the United States ceded longline catch and purse-seine fishing effort limits. By contrast, despite being subject to some constraints, the member nations of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) can continue to expand their tuna fisheries, especially purse seining. The flimsy excuse for this unchecked expansion is that the Pacific Island members of FFA have to bear a disproportionate burden of the conservation measures, though this has yet to be convincingly demonstrated to the United States and other Commission members.

The Commission's area of jurisdiction extends from the Asian mainland to the 150 degree line of longitude, which doglegs around French Polynesia south of the equator. Waters to the east of this boundary come under the competence of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), of which the United States is also a member.

The status of bigeye tuna has been a concern for both Commissions for the past decade, due to catches being much higher than the maximum sustainable yield (MSY). Since the 1950s, most bigeye in the Pacific was caught by longline vessels. Purse-seine vessels targeted skipjack and yellowfin fishing on free schools and caught very little bigeye tuna. However, the increasing use of free floating or tethered rafts, known as fish aggregating devices (FADs), and the use of deeper purse-seine nets from the 1980s onwards saw a marked increase in purse-seine caught bigeye, predominantly small juvenile fish.

Management of bigeye by the Commission has focused on both purse-seine and longline bigeye catches. Measures for longliners have included setting catch limits for national fleets, based on a reduction from a base year or average of base years. A Commission decision in 2008 forced the Hawaii-based longline fishery, to take a 10% cut in its bigeye landings from 2009 onwards, resulting in a catch limit of 3,763 mt.

The chief measure for purse seiners has focused on limiting the number of sets made around FADs, with no FAD sets allowed during July and August in 2009-2010, July through September in 2011-2012, and July through October in 2013.

The combination of purse-seine and longline measures was intended to reduce the overall fishing mortality by 30%. Both the US longline and purse-seine fisheries abided by CMM 2008-01 and subsequent interim measures in 2012 and 2013. As such, it was hoped that US fisheries would not be further penalized and forced to take additional cuts in the measure for 2014-2017.

Unfortunately, a consensus could not be reached with the other members of the Commission unless the US fisheries were subject to additional measures to reduce their bigeye catches. Consequently, the Hawaii-based longline fishery must cut its bigeye catch by a further 10%, in two increments in 2015 and 2017. This will reduce the Hawaii-based fishery bigeye catch to 3,345 mt. This further reduction was required for the Hawaii fleet even

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though most of its fishery does not occur in tropical waters and, unlike the longline fleets of other developed countries, is a fresh fish fishery, with the tuna returning to Hawaii for local consumption.

The four-month closure for US purse-seine vessels will continue in 2014, but equally troublesome to the industry is that the opportunity for high seas catches by US purse seiners was drastically reduced, to a level of only 1,270 fishing days. Currently, US regulations limit US high seas and US economic zone catches combined to 2,588 fishing days.

These reductions may have a small benefit for WCPO bigeye but are likely to have significant economic consequences for both fisheries. In 2010, the Hawaii longline fishery was closed for 40 days in November and December, a peak time for bigeye demand, with losses to the fishery of millions of dollars and impacts to over 200 jobs in the local seafood industry.

The reductions in US high seas purse-seine catches will likely be around 800 to 1,000 fishing days, which is estimated to have a value of approximately \$50 million. Also, there will be a negative impact on the American Samoan economy, since most of the fish caught on the high seas is landed and processed in American Samoa. Importantly, reductions in high seas catches were not recommended by Commission scientists and will not benefit the bigeye stock since it is not FAD fishing that is being reduced but all purse-seine fishing, including that which does not impact bigeye tuna. So this is not a conservation measure but an economic decision, and one that favors other countries to the detriment of the United States.

Although some other countries' fleets will be affected by the 2013 tropical tuna measure, none will be negatively impacted to the same degree as US fisheries. One reason for this is that the Commission has no mechanism to ensure compliance, and there is no reason to believe that the many countries involved in the fisheries are strictly following the measures. However, US authorities are vigilant in enforcing the Commission's rules against US vessels, so there is not a level playing field. Similarly, unlike catches by other countries, US catches of all fish are scrupulously monitored and reported. Many other longline fleets do not even provide the required reporting information to the Commission or its scientists.

Unfortunately, the scope for actions to further reduce fishing mortality on bigeye in the future is rather limited. The measures implemented by the Commission refer to the high seas and the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of the Commission member countries, but do not include the near-shore archipelagic waters. This limits the actions that can be taken by the Commission while still leaving large sources of bigeye fishing mortality

Tuna fisheries in the archipelagic waters of the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, which are based predominantly on FADs, will continue to catch large volumes of juvenile fish during the FAD closure periods. Further, longline fisheries in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands will not be required to limit catches, while Indonesia's longline bigeye catch will be almost tripled from its current limit of 2,192 mt to 5,889 mt. Indonesia is also treated as if it were one of the small island developing states (SIDS) with respect to fishing capacity. All Commission members apart from the SIDS and Indonesia are required to keep their purse-seine and longline fleets at current levels. This leaves significant gaps in the measure to limit fleet expansion and fishing mortality on bigeye.

Both the US longline and purse-seine fleets are iconic fisheries, which have been used as the models for other fleets to emulate in terms of standards for fishery management, including compliance monitoring, data provision and research. However, at the Cairns Commission meeting, it seems that the US fisheries were sacrificed by the negotiators in an unbalanced way and to little overall positive effect for the bigeye stock.

The FFA announced in a recent press release that "it will build on the gains made from the Cairns summit at the next meeting to be held in Samoa." US fishermen by contrast are left wondering how they are going to survive. During the next four years US longline and purse seine fisheries will face increasing competition from other Commission members whose fisheries are less severely regulated or, in the case of the SIDS, not required to take cuts in longline bigeye catch or cuts in purse-seine fishing effort.