Web Conference of the Permanent Advisory Committee
to Advise the U.S. Commissioners
to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission
June 10, 2021
Meeting Summary

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Meeting Summary

General Summary:

The web conference of the Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to advise the U.S. Commissioners to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) was held from 11 am-1 pm *Hawaii Standard Time* on June 10, 2021. The Chair of the PAC, Ryan Steen, led the meeting after opening remarks were made by the Alternate Federal Commissioner to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), Alexa Cole, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Fisheries, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The PAC Statement of Organization, Practices, and Procedures state, "A majority of all current members of the Advisory Committee shall constitute a quorum". Quorum was not reached for this web meeting, therefore no decisions or recommendations from the PAC were officially recognized.

The web conference covered a variety of topics including priority issues for 2021, upcoming WCPFC meetings, and other relevant topics, which can be found listed in detail on the agenda (Attachment 2). Furthermore, the discussions for each of the agenda items are summarized below.

Agenda Item I – Priority issues for 2021

Agenda Item Ia – Tropical tunas

NOAA summarized the outcomes of the Commission's workshop in April on developing a new measure for the tropical tuna fisheries, and in preparation for the next workshop (in September) highlighted a few key issues and possible approaches for the consideration of the PAC, including:

- Area-tailored longline bigeye tuna catch limits
- Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) incentives for greater longline bigeye tuna catch limits
- Purse seine fishing effort limits in the U.S. EEZ and on the high seas
- Alternatives to Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) closures because of the lack of observer report sharing
- Exemption to the FAD closure for Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) members' vessels

The PAC discussed the prospects of increasing observer coverage in the longline fishery, including by incentivizing it with greater catch limits; the potential for modest increases in longline limits if the management objective for bigeye tuna does not change; the possibility of having a longline vessel-day scheme in part of the Convention Area and catch limits in other areas; the idea of establishing one set of longline bigeye tuna catch limits in a relatively temperate band and another in the more tropical band where depletion of the stock is greater; and the need for the American Samoa-based purse seine fishery to be treated like other small island development members and territories, such as by being exempt from fishing effort limits on the high seas.

Agenda Item Ib – Pacific bluefin tuna

NOAA provided an update on the meeting dates for the Sixth Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and WCPFC-NC Joint Working Group Meeting on the Management of Pacific Bluefin Tuna and the 17th Meeting of the Northern Committee. NOAA noted that it has had a couple of informal exchanges with Japan and relayed Japan's interests in increasing catch limits, changing the duration of the measure, and modifying the conversion factor for transfers of the small fish catch limit for large fish. The PAC expressed optimism that the stock has likely met the first rebuilding target and urged a precautionary approach in considering any potential changes to a measure. NOAA also noted that no further decisions had been made on the MSE, and that it was considering areas for further development of the harvest strategy.

Agenda Item Ic – South Pacific albacore

Following NMFS review of preparations for the upcoming WCPFC South Pacific albacore roadmap working group online meeting, a member of the public and a member of the Council reiterated their shared view of the importance of the 2021-22 stock assessment - especially in the context of establishing harvest control rules in a future, revised, management measure. American Samoa highlighted the dire straits of its longline fishery and how important South Pacific albacore are for the economic and food security of the territory.

Agenda Item Id – Marine mammals *[attachment]*

NOAA provided an update on the development of draft WCPFC guidelines for the safe handling and release of cetaceans, which the United States informally agreed to submit for discussion at the upcoming Seventeenth Regular Session of the Scientific Committee meeting (SC17). A draft of the guidelines was circulated to the PAC for review and NOAA requested comments back from PAC members by June 17, so that they could be incorporated prior to submitting the draft guidelines to SC17. The PAC discussed current domestic requirements for the Hawaii Longline fleet, emphasized the voluntary nature of any guidelines adopted by the WCPFC and suggested that it may be worthwhile for NOAA to reach out to some WCPFC members to get feedback on the draft guidelines in advance of submission to SC17.

Agenda Item II – Participating Territories issues

NOAA offered for Participating Territories to raise any issues or concerns not previously addressed at this time. No comments were received.

Agenda Item III – Upcoming WCPFC meetings

NOAA shared the following list of upcoming meetings:

- Intersessional work on improving crew labor standards workshop- July 12, 2021 (virtual)
- Sixth Joint IATTC-NC Working Group Meeting on PBF Management - July 27-29, 2021 (virtual)
- WCPFC Scientific Committee - August 11-19, 2021 (virtual)
- WCPFC Tropical Tuna Measure Workshop 2- September 6-10, 2021 (online)
- WCPFC Technical and Compliance Committee - September 22-28, 2021 (tentatively online)
- WCPFC Northern Committee – October 5-7, 2021 (online)
- Annual meeting of the PAC - October 13-15, 2021 (tentatively online). If held in person, dates will be October 14-15, 2021

Agenda Item IV – Other business

Agenda Item IVa – Crew labor

NOAA summarized the status of the intersessional work on developing a crew labor standards conservation and management measure, indicating that the United States had submitted general comments on Indonesia's WCPFC17 proposal and was waiting for a revised document and details of the workshop tentatively scheduled for July.

A member of the PAC stated that because the issue of crew safety is so large, it would be better to focus a WCPFC measure on forced labor and human trafficking; noting that sometimes the definition of forced labor includes human trafficking. A member of the public also noted that the issue of crew safety standards is complicated, with different entities having different standards, so it would be better for the WCPFC not to attempt to spread across the whole range of these issues. Another member of the PAC stated that the issue is already well covered in the private sector, with the seafood task force attempting to make sure industry is doing the right thing.

Agenda Item IVb – COVID-19

NOAA reminded the PAC that the intersessional Commission COVID-related decisions will expire on August 15, 2021 and would likely continue to be extended until regional health and travel circumstances improve. The intersessional Commission COVID-related decisions waived requirements for purse seine and transshipment observers while easing restrictions on at-sea transshipment.

NOAA also brought to the attention of the PAC that the draft agenda for the September 2021 Tropical Tuna workshop included agenda item: "6.1.2. Processes to support safe redeployment of observers on vessels", and that the United States would need to begin thinking about how it would want to restart the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) observers in 2022 with an eye towards proactively protecting AS and fleet interests and safety.

Agenda Item IVc – North Pacific albacore management strategy evaluation *[attachment]*

NOAA noted that it had recently hosted a public stakeholders to provide input on North Pacific albacore management and outputs from the management strategy evaluation (MSE) recently

completed by the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-Like Species (ISC). A PAC member noted that while there was a lot of discussion on a number of topics, there were not a lot of firm conclusions, and felt it may be premature to discuss changes to the interim harvest strategy without more opportunities for stakeholder discussion. Another PAC member, however, noted that U.S. stakeholders may have differing perspectives on management for North Pacific albacore and expressed support for the United States to take steps forward to develop harvest control rules based on the outputs from the MSE.

A PAC member urged the United States to continue efforts to revise the conservation and management measure for North Pacific striped marlin, and to improve collection of billfish catch and discard information. A PAC member also noted that the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council recently made recommendations related to its Magnuson-Stevens Act 304(i) international requirements for North Pacific striped marlin.

ATTACHMENT 1: Meeting Participants

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ATTACHMENT 2: Final Agenda

Web Conference of the Permanent Advisory Committee

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to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

June 10, 2021

11 am-1 pm HST

AGENDA

1. Priority issues for 2021

    a. Tropical tunas
    b. Pacific bluefin tuna
    c. South Pacific albacore
    d. Marine mammals *[attachment]*

2. Participating Territories issues

3. Upcoming WCPFC meetings

4. Other business

    a. Crew labor
    b. COVID-19
    c. North Pacific albacore management strategy evaluation *[attachment]*

ATTACHMENT 3: Best Practices For The Safe Handling and Release of Cetaceans

The following are guidelines for best handling practices of marine mammals, specifically cetaceans, for both purse seine and longline vessels fishing for tuna and tuna-like species in the Pacific Ocean:

GENERAL PROVISIONS:

Once a cetacean is observed inside a purse seine net or hooked or entangled on longline gear, immediately notify the captain, cease fishing, and ensure the crew has the proper equipment on hand and knows what to do.

Safety First: These guidelines should be considered in light of safety and practicability for crew. Crew safety should always come first. Cetaceans can be very powerful and hooked or entangled cetaceans can be unpredictable, therefore it is not safe to enter the water in order to release an animal.

Quick Release: For all gear types, keep animals in the water whenever possible. Removing a cetacean from the water is extremely stressful for the animal and can cause injury, so they should be released while in the water, wherever possible. If necessary to land small cetaceans on deck in purse seine fisheries, always minimize time on deck and release cetaceans back to the water as soon as possible. When handling cetaceans, it is always best to handle with two or more people.

Suggested Equipment: Vessels should have equipment on board to facilitate the release of cetaceans. For purse seine vessels, suggested equipment includes: canvas or net slings or stretchers for carrying or lifting, large mesh net or grid to cover hatches/hoppers, and tools for cutting/removing net. For longline vessels, suggested equipment includes long handled cutters and de-hookers.

FOR LARGE CETACEANS (*baleen whales and sperm whales*) **:**

1. Large cetaceans should remain in the water
2. Do not attempt to release large cetaceans by having crew in the water
3. For longline gear, maneuver vessel to minimize tension on the fishing gear
4. Release the animal as quickly as possible, without jeopardizing the safety of the crew

FOR SMALL CETACEANS (*all toothed whales other than sperm whales*)**:**

In Purse Seine Gear:

Do's*:*

If in purse seine net:

1. Facilitate release of cetaceans while they are still free-swimming using whatever means that are safe and practical (e.g. back down procedure[1], 'dolphin gate'[2], cutting net, etc.)

If in brail or on deck:

1. Cetaceans that cannot be released without compromising the safety of persons or the cetaceans before being landed on deck must be returned to the water as soon as possible, either utilizing a ramp from the deck connecting to an opening on the side of the vessel, or through escape hatches. If ramps or escape hatches are not available, cetaceans should be lowered with a sling or cargo net, using a crane or similar equipment, if available.
2. If entangled in netting, carefully cut the net away from the animal and release it to sea as quickly as possible with minimal or no netting attached.
3. If on deck, keep the animal in an upright position, with dorsal side up.
4. Be cautious of the tail, which is powerful and can cause injury. Lift from the mid-section of the cetacean when possible, and never from the tail.
5. Cease hauling until cetacean is released, release cetacean as soon as possible.
6. Release cetaceans away from fishing operations, when main engines are in neutral to minimize the risk of further entanglement. Maintain observation of released animals until they have disappeared from sight or are sufficiently distant from the vessel to ensure no further interaction before resuming fishing operations.

Don'ts:

1. Do not handle the animal in any way that could cause harm, including
    a. Do not cut or punch holes through the animal's body
    b. Do not use gaffs or sharp objects to grab, move, or hold the animal
    c. Do not leave the animal exposed to sunlight for extended periods on deck
    d. Cetaceans breathe through their blowhole. Do not drag or pull the cetacean underwater in a manner that prevents it from surfacing to breathe. Do not cover or block the blowhole, or spray water in or near it, or allow water or other material to

[1] Backdown Procedure: The vessel goes astern, so the corkline becomes elliptical and the most forward end is pulled below the surface, thus facilitating escape.

[2] Dolphin gate: A prefabricated quick release rope detaches the corkline from the seine net, which sinks and creates an opening for escape.

flow into the blowhole.

e. Do not push, pull, bend, or lift by tail, flippers, fins, flukes or beaks
f. Do not rest the cetacean on sharp or rough surfaces.

In Longline Gear

Do's:

1. Determine if the animal is hooked or entangled and prepare to remove the line.
    a. If entangled: Maneuver the vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut as much line off of or as close to the animal as you can.
    b. If hooked:
        i. Determine whether the hook is ingested or not. If the hook appears to be ingested, maneuver vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the hook as possible, removing as much gear as possible
        ii. If the hook is not ingested:
            1. If using "weak[3]" circle hooks:
                a. maintain tension on the line, giving the hook a chance to straighten and release the animal without the hook or trailing line attached.
                b. If the hook does not straighten, use a de-hooker to remove the hook and trailing line.
                c. If the hook is not straightened or removed, use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close as you can to the hook, removing as much gear as possible.
            2. If not using weak circle hooks: Avoid pulling sharply on the branchline. Maneuver vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the hook as possible, removing as much gear as possible .

Don'ts:

1. Do not handle the animal in any way that could cause harm
    a. Do not use gaffs or sharp objects to grab, move, or hold an animal
    b. Do not cover or block the blowhole, or spray water in or near it, to allow uninterrupted breathing
    c. Do not push, pull or lift by tail, flippers, fins, flukes or beaks
    d. Do not drag or pull the cetacean underwater in a manner that prevents it from surfacing to breathe.

[3] Circle hooks with a wire diameter of 4.5 mm or less with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees

References:

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Good Practice Guide for the Handling of Cetaceans Caught Incidentally in Mediterranean Fisheries.

Hamer, D. and Minton, G. (2020). Guidelines for the safe and humane handling and release of bycaught small cetaceans from fishing gear. UNEP/CMS Secretariat. Bonn, Germany 50 pages. CMS Technical Series No. 43.

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Marine Mammal Handling and Release Guidelines. NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office.

NMFS. Protected Species Workshop Handling, Release, and Identification Guidelines. NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office.

NMFS. Marine mammal handling/release guidelines: A quick reference for Atlantic pelagic longline gear. NMFS/ARFO Marine Mammal Handling Guidelines. NMFS Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office.

ATTACHMENT 4: North Pacific Albacore MSE...The Very Basic Lite Version

Background

The Albacore Working Group (ALBWG) of the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species (ISC) recently completed a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for North Pacific albacore (NPALB). A MSE is a process that uses computer simulations to assess the performance of candidate harvest strategies, given management objectives conveyed by stakeholders and managers. The goal of the NPALB MSE was to examine the performance of alternative harvest strategies, including reference points, for NPALB relative to the set of management objectives agreed-upon with stakeholders.

From 2015 to 2021, the ALBWG held a series of workshops where managers and stakeholders had the opportunity to provide input on management objectives, harvest control rules and reference points for evaluation.

Management Objectives

The NPALB MSE considered the following five management objectives and developed performance indicators for each:

- Maintain spawning stock biomass (SSB) above the limit reference point (maintain historical spawning biomass)
- Maintain depletion of total biomass around historical average depletion (maintain historical total biomass)
- Maintain catches above average historical catch (maintain catches above historical average)
- Change in total allowable catch between years should be relatively gradual (minimize changes in management over time)
- Maintain fishing intensity (F) at the target value with reasonable variability (maintain fishing impact around the target value)

Harvest Control Rules and Reference Points

The NPALB MSE initially considered three types of harvest control rules, and eventually narrowed the evaluation to one type of harvest control rule. In this harvest control rule, the stock is considered to be at a desirable target level if SSB is above $SSB_{threshold}$ and the allowed fishing intensity is managed to be at a maximum level equivalent to the Target Reference Point (TRP) (the green line in Figure 1). If SSB falls below specific thresholds (vertical dotted lines in Figure 1), the allowed fishing intensity is reduced in proportion to the estimated SSB (yellow line in Figure 1 if $SSB/SSB_{threshold} < 1$) or down to a minimum level (red line in Figure 2 if SSB/LRP < 1), to allow biomass to increase back above the $SSB_{threshold}$ (Fig. 1).

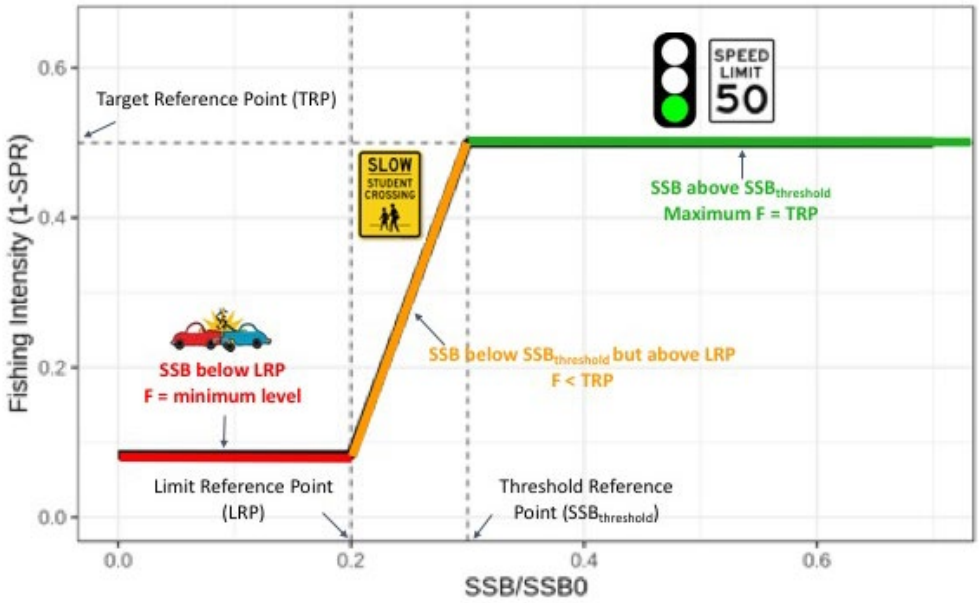

Figure 1 Example of a generic harvest control rule (HCR) tested in the NPALB MSE. SSB0 on the x-axis refers to dynamic unfished SSB (SSB0_d).

Reference Points

The NPALB MSE initially considered 23 harvest control rules (different combinations of type and reference points), and the second round considered 16 harvest control rules (one type with different combinations of target reference points (F50, F40[1]), threshold reference points (30% SSB0_d[2], 20% SSB0_d and 14% SSB0_d), limit reference points (20% SSB0_d, 14% SSB0_d, 7.7% SSB0_d[3]), and minimum F level).

[1] F[X] represents a fishing intensity (F; calculated in terms of spawning potential ratio) that leads to a SSB that fluctuates around X% of the unfished SSB (e.g., F40 would result in a fishing mortality that would remove about 60% of the SSB)

[2] SSB0_d is also commonly written as $SSB_{current, F=0}$

[3] The WCPFC adopted an LRP for NPALB of 20%SSB0_d. The IATTC has not yet adopted an LRP for NPALB, but 7.7% SSB0_d is the interim LRP for tropical tunas.

Operating Models and Management Actions

One of the strengths of an MSE is the ability to test a series of models to understand how uncertainties in various aspects of albacore biology or fleet dynamics can impact management. The first round of MSE considered 27 models, and the second round narrowed it to 4 operating models covering the range of plausible stock productivity. In addition, there was a "robustness" scenario that considered an unmanaged and unmonitored "ghost fleet" that enters the fishery and its catches increase annually up to a maximum of 50,000 mt.

Managers and stakeholders also specified *two types of management actions* for the MSE to evaluate: (1) using catch control for all fleets by setting Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for all fleets; or (2) using mixed control by managing longline fleets with TAC and surface fleets by Total Allowable Effort (TAE).

Results

- **All Harvest Control Rules performed well against the management objective to maintain SSB above the limit reference point.** The NPALB stock is in good condition, and even when considering the range of uncertainties, SSB rarely fell below the LRP or $SSB_{threshold}$ in any of the scenarios evaluated.
- **Tradeoff between catch and biomass.** Under mixed control, there was a tradeoff between the odds of biomass being above the 20%SSB0_d LRP and the catch performance metrics. In other words, if the stock is fished at a higher intensity (e.g., when the TRP is set to F40), the odds of SSB being above the 20%SSB0_d LRP declines.
- **Tradeoff between catch and catch stability.** Under TAC control, there are comparable odds of catch in any given year being above historical catch for F50 and F40 HCRs despite different fishing intensities due to a tradeoff between catch and catch stability. The higher fishing intensity of harvest control rules with TRPs of F40 led to higher but less stable catches. The higher catch variability decreased the odds of catch being higher than historical.
- **Harvest Control Rules with a 30% $SSB_{threshold}$ reference point had more frequent management intervention.** 30% SSB was the highest threshold reference point evaluated, and there were more frequent management interventions seen across the scenarios than under the threshold reference points of 20 or 14%.
- **Stock resilient to ghost fleet, but catches of managed fleet will be reduced.** Both mixed and TAC control are able to maintain the stock above the WCPFC's limit reference point (20% SSB0_d) and the IATTC interim limit reference point used for tropical tunas (7.7%SSB0_d) with high probability (>0.8), even with increasing catches from an unknown, unmanaged fleet. However, this comes at the expense of reduced catches for the managed fleets.