



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

5724 N. Route 9, New Gretna, NJ 08224

P: 888-564-6732 F: 609-294-3812

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Contact: Jim Hutchinson, Jr.

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888 564-6732

RFA SUBMITS COMMENTS IN OPPOSITION TO ESA PETITION November 22 Deadline For Input To Protect U.S. Bluefin Fishery

November 22, 2010 - The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) today went on record with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in opposing efforts to list Atlantic bluefin tuna as a threatened or endangered species.

In response to a request by the Center for Biological Diversity, NMFS announced that it had started an official review for possibly listing Atlantic bluefin under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As outlined in an RFA release in September such a definitive and restrictive ESA listing would summarily eliminate the recreational catch and release fishery for Atlantic bluefin tuna, and could also impact other coastal fisheries where bluefin might be harassed, captured or harmed as a bycatch fishery.

"There are some American conservationists who truly believe that a total catch and release bluefin fishery is not only acceptable within our recreational fishing community, but that it's actually attainable," said RFA Executive Director, Jim Donofrio. "If bluefin is awarded an ESA distinction, there will be no allowable fishing for bluefin within the United States, not for harvest and not for targeted sportfishing either," Donofrio said.

In his official comments submitted to NMFS Assistant Regional Administrator for the Northeast Region on behalf of RFA national members, Donofrio said while international management of Atlantic bluefin tuna has proven mostly a failure, the stock is not being adversely affected by the actions of U.S. fishermen. "Gross overfishing and noncompliance with quotas set by the International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in the east have reduced levels of Atlantic Bluefin in the eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean and western Atlantic," Donofrio said, adding "however, poor performance in relation to ICCAT objectives cannot be used to determine that the stock is headed for extinction."

Donofrio pointed to a "modest but sustained upward trend of rebuilding for Atlantic bluefin tuna," and noted that rebuilding efforts have had a disproportionate and negative impact on US fishermen, explaining how rebuilding of the Atlantic bluefin stock particularly in the western Atlantic has been spurred by strong compliance of U.S. fishermen with ICCAT quotas. "RFA supports improving the management and compliance of Atlantic bluefin tuna for the benefit of US fishermen and the US fishing industry but is adamant that an ESA listing is not the appropriate or most productive option."

At the ongoing ICCAT meetings in Paris, delegates from around the world are meeting to review the 2010 Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Stock Assessment Session (Report) compiled by noted fisheries experts, including eight NOAA staff biologists. Donofrio said since the Endangered Species Protection Act states clearly that any listing determinations be made solely on the basis of the best scientific and commercial data available, the latest Report on bluefin on its own would be enough to kill the ESA petition. "Based on these criteria as it relates to the expertise involved with the Report, the timing of its release, and NOAA's considerable involvement, RFA believes the Report should serve as the best scientific and commercial data to make the endangered and/or threatened determinations for Atlantic bluefin tuna," Donofrio said.

RFA also made the point that the latest Report from ICCAT indicates that the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean spawning stock biomass showed slight increases over the past few years, while showing for the western Atlantic bluefin stock "the strong 2003 year class continues to contribute to stock productivity such that biomass has been increasing in recent years."

"Both the western and Eastern/Mediterranean stocks of Atlantic bluefin tuna are on a path towards rebuilding," Donofrio said, adding "noting the undisputed rebuilding occurring in the Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks, it is clear that neither the definition of endangered or threatened apply to the Atlantic bluefin."

This past March, United Nations delegates voted to defeat a U.S. proposal to ban the international trade of bluefin tuna under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Almost immediately, environmental organizations sounded the alarm, railing against the decision while claiming it would lead to the global collapse or extinction of bluefin. Perhaps accustomed to decades of anti-commercial fishing sentiment within the recreational fishing community, several members of the sportfishing industry were quick to echo the sentiments of the preservationist agenda.

"It's naive to continually think of bluefin as purely a gamefish in the United States when there's such an immense global demand for bluefin tuna," Donofrio said, adding "and since recreational harvest quotas are determined by a percentage of the overall U.S. commercial quota, a CITES listing would have turned much of our bluefin fishery into pure catch and release, completely destroying the angling community's chances to harvest Western Atlantic bluefin." RFA believes the failure to secure a CITES listing prompted U.S. environmental groups to take a stab at a complete hands-off approach to protecting bluefin in this country, to the disadvantage of our own coastal fishermen and with little positive impact on bluefin.

"Protection afforded to a species with an ESA listing is limited to the territorial lands and waters of the United States," Donofrio said in his official comments, explaining that in terms of bluefin tuna, such protection would end at the 200 mile limit. "RFA has long proposed that the problems with bluefin tuna are driven primarily by foreign noncompliance and illegal fishing outside of US waters. US fishermen are not a cause for the stock to be approximately 57% of historic high biomass levels and it should be obvious that additional regulation on US fishermen through an ESA listing would not benefit the overall Atlantic bluefin stock," Donofrio added.

"With ESA protection ending at the US EEZ and having no impact on fishing efforts on the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, ESA should not be considered as an effective management tool for bluefin tuna," Donofrio stated, explaining how a more productive and meaningful effort to promote bluefin rebuilding would be to demand compliance with ICCAT quotas by all contracting members. "U.S. fishermen should not carry the entire burden of rebuilding this important fishery. Nor will imposing ESA based regulations in US waters increase the likelihood that ICCAT contracting members will comply with agreed upon quotas," he added.

In 2002, RFA petitioned the U.S. government for trade sanctions against the European Union (EU) for "irresponsible and illegal fishing practices" impacting both marlin and bluefin. By petitioning the U.S. Secretary of Commerce to certify the EU under the Pelly Amendment to the Fishermen's Protective Act of 1967 for irresponsible fishing practices, RFA gained assurances from the Bush Administration that actions would be taken to protect both U.S. fishing interests and the stock of Atlantic bluefin.

"If these U.S. preservationists wanted to really address the bluefin fishery, instead of taking on another senseless attack upon the American sportfishing industry they'd instead use some of their untold millions to pull off some of the heavy lifting required to take action against these international criminals under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974," Donofrio said, adding "Regrettably, our trade groups have taken the preservationist's logic, and not the other way around."

View RFA's official comments at www.joinrfa.org/Press/BluefinESAComments111010.pdf

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA's Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.