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The Pew Charitable Trusts'
Statement to Panel 1 of the 20th Special Meeting of ICCAT
15 November 2016

After a series of challenging negotiations in both Panel 1 and the Plenary last year, ICCAT adopted a risky rebuilding plan for the Atlantic bigeye tuna – a stock that scientists determined to be both overfished and experiencing overfishing, and to be vulnerable to high levels of juvenile mortality associated with FADs. With a total allowable catch (TAC) that has only a 49% chance of ending overfishing and recovering the stock on a 13 year timeline, this current measure falls short of even the basic objectives of the Convention and relies on untested, unproven additional measures that ICCAT hopes will improve the likelihood of successfully recovering the stock in a timely manner. Recent statements from the SCRS make it clear that the additional measures were not based on scientific advice, and the second independent performance review of ICCAT concluded that “the management of fisheries on this stock by ICCAT is not consistent with the objective of the Convention.” Furthermore, exemptions to the rebuilding plan for minor harvesters and the related reflagging of vessels, could very well lead, for the first time in 2016, to an annual catch of a tropical tuna stock that is higher than the TAC. This is clearly not an acceptable situation. Fortunately, there is an opportunity for ICCAT to improve the rebuilding plan this year. As the recent finding that the Atlantic yellowfin stock is still slightly overfished will require some renegotiation of Recommendation 15-01 on tropical tuna management, Panel 1 and ICCAT will have a second chance to also address the heavily depleted Atlantic bigeye. It is vital that Panel 1 heed the advice of the performance review by:

- Further lowering the bigeye TAC this year, in order to increase the likelihood of recovering the stock and shorten its timeline for success;
- Immediately reducing juvenile mortality of bigeye and yellowfin by enacting policies that limit the number and use of FADs,
- Prioritizing the issue of juvenile mortality associated with FADs by expanding the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group on FADs to include instructions to develop management recommendations that directly and unequivocally limit juvenile mortality.

In addition to lowering the bigeye TAC to a level that scientists believe has a reasonable probability of successfully recovering the stock, Panel 1 should also find a way to ensure that the actual catch is held below these levels. This may mean addressing the current system of exemptions for minor harvesters or limiting the entry of new fishing capacity until the stock has fully recovered.

Waiting until the catch breaches the TAC or until another assessment reveals more trouble for the stock is not consistent with the precautionary approach and is not a prudent management strategy for Atlantic bigeye. This is particularly true while the maximum sustainable yield for this stock and for Atlantic yellowfin continues to decline, a result of the increasing numbers of these fish that are taken before they can reproduce.

The Atlantic bigeye and yellowfin stocks are extremely valuable to fishermen and processors in the region. Without careful consideration of a complete rebuilding plan, including a real effort to limit juvenile mortality, the fisheries for these two stocks – both industrial and small-scale – are at risk of decline. Atlantic bigeye cannot wait until 2018 or beyond for new management options that promote recovery.