

Opening Statement of the United States of America

21st Special Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas

The United States would like to express our gratitude to the European Union and the Government of Croatia for their hospitality and generosity in hosting the 21st Special Meeting of ICCAT. We are pleased to attend this year's Commission meeting in the beautiful and historic city of Dubrovnik, and look forward to the productive discussions ahead. We would also like to welcome Mr. Camille Jean Pierre Manel to his first Commission meeting as our Executive Secretary and thank him and the Secretariat staff for their excellent preparations for this meeting.

The last time we were in Dubrovnik, in 2006, the Commission took the first, difficult steps towards putting in place a comprehensive rebuilding plan for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna. That was a challenging process, but it laid the groundwork for the eventual improvement in that stock we see today. This year, we are facing what may be an even bigger challenge. The 2018 stock assessment for bigeye tuna indicates that the stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing. It is now clear that the ICCAT tropical tuna measures adopted to-date have not worked. They have not effectively managed purse seine effort, particularly that associated with FADs, to a level consistent with a sustainable bigeye tuna fishery. They have not effectively addressed the disproportionate catch of juvenile yellowfin and bigeye in the tropical tuna fishery. And they have not effectively controlled overall catch. It is clear that we must rethink our approach. ICCAT now has no choice but to take the difficult management decisions needed to ensure stock recovery: we must adopt a rebuilding program at this meeting that eliminates overfishing and has a high probability of recovering the stock, in line with the *Recommendation by ICCAT on the Principles of Decision Making for ICCAT Conservation and Management Measures* [Rec. 11-13], improves the monitoring and control of this fishery, and ensures fair and equitable fishing opportunities for the diverse fleets that target this important resource. This is a daunting task, but the United States stands ready to work with all of the others around this table to make it happen.

In addition to bigeye tuna, the Commission will need to spend time at this meeting considering the conservation and management of blue marlin. This year's stock assessment indicates that the stock remains in the red zone of the Kobe quadrant; it is overfished with overfishing occurring. Given that this stock has not moved out of the red zone for more than 18 years, despite a series of ICCAT measures, it's time for ICCAT to move toward a formal rebuilding program for this stock -- and for white marlin/spearfish -- that accounts not only for landings but also for dead discards. The United States is tabling a proposal that would continue the current landings limits for both blue marlin and white marlin/spearfish for one more year, but adds measures that will reduce mortality and help ensure that these limits are not exceeded. Toward this end, our proposal also reflects the Second ICCAT Performance Review's recommendation that the Commission actively encourage, or make obligatory, the use of circle hooks in longline fisheries to reduce the post-release mortality of overfished marlins. Together, these measures should end overfishing in line with SCRS advice, taking the first critical step in the rebuilding process. Next year, after the white marlin stock assessment is complete, we must adopt comprehensive,

science-based rebuilding programs for these species that will recover the stocks in as short a timeframe as possible with at least a 50% probability.

After a long but constructive process, the United States is very pleased with the successful conclusion of the work of the Convention Amendment Working Group. We now look forward to considering the next steps in finalizing the Convention amendment package, including the associated resolution and recommendation.

ICCAT also has the opportunity to make progress on a number of monitoring, control, and surveillance issues in PWG this year. In particular, the United States encourages CPCs to adopt proposals to modernize ICCAT's existing VMS minimum standards, to bring ICCAT's port inspection scheme more in line with the FAO's Port State Measures Agreement, and to protect the health and safety of observers in ICCAT's regional observer programs.

Finally, we are pleased to cosponsor three proposals for Panel 4 this year related to mitigating the impacts of ICCAT fisheries on associated species. The *Supplemental Draft Recommendation by ICCAT on the By-Catch of Sea Turtles* (PA4-809), co-sponsored by Panama, would require CPCs to implement one of several options recommended by the SCRS for turtle bycatch mitigation. The *Draft Recommendation by ICCAT on Monitoring and Avoiding Cetacean Interactions in ICCAT Fisheries* (PA4-807), co-sponsored by Canada, would prohibit purse seine vessels from intentionally setting on schools of tuna associated with cetaceans, similar to measures already adopted by other tuna RFMOs. And the *Draft Recommendation by ICCAT Concerning the Conservation of Sharks Caught in Association with Fisheries Managed by ICCAT* (PA4-806), would strengthen catch and landings data and ease the enforcement of ICCAT's ban on shark finning. We have received widespread support for this proposal in past years and urge CPCs to adopt it at this meeting.

The United States looks forward to constructive and positive collaboration with all ICCAT members to achieve these important priorities this week.