

OPENING STATEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States would like to extend our gratitude and thanks to the European Union and the Government of Spain for their hospitality in hosting the 26th Regular Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). We are pleased to be here in beautiful Palma de Mallorca, and look forward to the many important and productive discussions we will have over the next week. We would also like to express our appreciation to the Executive Secretary and the Secretariat staff for the time and effort spent preparing for this meeting.

We are excited that ICCAT will celebrate its 50th birthday by adopting the Protocol to amend the ICCAT Convention. This is an occasion almost ten years in the making, reflecting an enormous amount of work and goodwill around this table. The package of amendments we all agreed to in principle last year, along with the associated resolution and recommendation, will bring the ICCAT Convention into the 21st century - enshrining ICCAT's commitment to precautionary, science-based management of our fisheries and the broader marine ecosystem, improving our process of decision-making, and ensuring transparency and fair participation. We are proud to join with our fellow ICCAT members to take this final step. Now we must all work to bring these amendments into force as quickly as possible so they can chart ICCAT's course for the next 50 years.

As we begin this year's negotiations, we are feeling a sense of déjà vu. Our inability to come to agreement on a number of issues last year means that we must now make difficult management decisions for a number of stocks that can no longer afford the consequences of our inaction.

Of particular concern is bigeye tuna. Last year's stock assessment made it clear that the stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing, yet ICCAT failed to come to consensus on a new measure to address the decline and begin stock recovery. We cannot allow that to happen again. We appreciate the leadership of the Chair of Panel 1 to gather input from CPCs to develop a new proposal and identify the most important issues for our consideration. The United States is ready to collaborate with our partners around the table to finally establish science-based conservation and management measures that end overfishing immediately and rebuild the stock as soon as possible, while providing for fair and equitable fishing opportunities and ensuring effective implementation through strengthened monitoring and control and other provisions.

The Commission also learned last year that the blue marlin stock remains overfished with overfishing occurring, yet could not reach agreement on a new measure. Further, ICCAT learned this year that white marlin remains overfished. Despite a series of management recommendations over the last 19 years, blue marlin has not moved out of the red zone of the Kobe plot, and white marlin is still in the yellow zone. The Commission can no longer delay taking action to establish formal rebuilding programs for blue marlin and white marlin/roundscale spearfish that meaningfully reduce mortality. Toward that end, the United States is tabling a proposal, the *Draft Recommendation by ICCAT to Establish Rebuilding Programs for Blue Marlin and White Marlin/Roundscale Spearfish* (PA4-813), to end overfishing of blue marlin immediately and rebuild both stocks in 10 years, taking into account both reported and unreported landings and dead discards for these stocks. It also includes new management measures to ensure that landings limits are not exceeded and to reduce mortality at haulback and post release. Central to this end, our proposal reflects the SCRS advice that using circle hooks in longline fisheries would reduce the mortality of overfished marlins.

Another Panel 4 issue that the United States remains very concerned about is the status of the North Atlantic shortfin mako stock. We have led the way in implementing fishery management measures in line with the *Recommendation by ICCAT on the Conservation of North Atlantic Stock of Shortfin Mako Caught in Association with ICCAT Fisheries* (Rec. 17-08), and our catch of these sharks has been greatly reduced. Yet, based on this year's stock assessment update, and as specified in Rec. 17-08, further action is needed to rebuild the stock. In response, the United States is tabling a proposal, the "Draft Recommendation by ICCAT to Establish a Rebuilding Program for North Atlantic Shortfin Mako Sharks Caught in Association with ICCAT Fisheries" (PA4-814), recognizing that simply requiring release of all mako sharks is not enough. Ambitious catch reductions, including reductions of dead discards, are needed to effectively end overfishing and rebuild this stock. Our proposal requires that vessels release North Atlantic shortfin mako but allows some limited retention of the species, dependent on individual CPCs achieving the required reductions and meeting other

conditions. It also requires the use of circle hooks and nylon monofilament line to help prevent the targeting of this species and improve the survivability of released makos. Given the extent of the reductions needed and adjustments that will be needed in the fishery, our proposal offers a two-phase process for achieving the reduced catch levels. The United States looks forward to gaining the necessary support and collaboration from other CPCs to pass this proposal in order to end overfishing immediately and rebuild this important and severely overfished stock.

The United States is once again proud to co-sponsor the “Draft Recommendation by ICCAT Concerning the Conservation of Sharks Caught in Association with Fisheries Managed by ICCAT” (PA4-806), which would strengthen catch and landings data and simplify the enforcement of ICCAT’s ban on shark finning. This proposal has received widespread support in past years, and we urge CPCs to adopt it at this meeting.

Reducing the bycatch and mortality of tens of thousands of threatened and endangered sea turtles and other vulnerable species each year in ICCAT longline fisheries is a particularly important priority for the United States. For years, ICCAT has been working towards the adoption of measures that ensure effective bycatch mitigation for protected living marine resources without success. The best available science from the SCRS continues to show the effectiveness of circle hooks in reducing bycatch and increasing post-release survival of sea turtles and billfish in shallow-set longline fisheries. As a Commission, we need to do more to meet our responsibility to these species by not continuing to allow fishing practices for our target species at the detriment of bycatch species such as sea turtles. We must do better.

The United States has made concerted efforts within RFMOs to adopt and strengthen bycatch measures. Over the past three years, we have advocated for and seen improvements in the way RFMOs collect bycatch data, as well as how they develop and implement management responses. Working together, we can continue to strengthen bycatch governance. We were very pleased at the adoption at the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) this year of a measure that mandated the use of circle hooks in the shallow-set longline fishery. We would like to see similar progress at ICCAT this year. Using the best scientific information available and following IATTC precedent, the United States is again introducing a proposal, the “Draft Recommendation by ICCAT on the Bycatch of Sea Turtles Caught in Association with ICCAT Fisheries” (PA4-812) with the aim of implementing the SCRS advice to conserve these important, protected species.

The United States has used circle hooks domestically for 15 years to reduce sea turtle bycatch and bycatch mortality in our pelagic longline fishery. We have consistently promoted the mandatory use of circle hooks and other related mitigation measures and are wholly committed to expanding their use broadly to further conserve these and other important species. Despite strong commitment to these objectives by many ICCAT members, several members continue to oppose adoption of binding conservation and management measures mandating the use of circle hooks.

When the relevant international organization for the conservation and protection of such resources, meaning ICCAT in this situation, has failed to establish effective measures for its members to implement to end or reduce such bycatch, the United States is obligated, under U.S. law, to ensure that countries whose fishing practices on the high seas have resulted in bycatch of protected living marine resources have adopted a regulatory program governing such fishing practices designed to end or reduce such bycatch that is comparable to that of the United States, including, as appropriate, the use of circle hooks.

To that end, over the next two years, the United States will work with our international partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to improve our understanding of their current mitigation practices for pelagic longline fisheries within ICCAT, IATTC and WCPFC, and encourage the adoption of circle hooks and other related bycatch mitigation tools.

If we continue to not make multilateral progress in adopting an effective bycatch mitigation measure at ICCAT, and CPCs do not take independent action to do so, the United States will be required to take domestic action under our law to identify countries in our 2021 Report to Congress that have bycatch of protected living marine resources but have not adopted regulatory programs that are comparable to that of the United States.

Regarding Atlantic bluefin tuna, the United States remains committed to working toward completion of the Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) process. Despite the recommendation of the SCRS to delay the process by one year to allow needed technical work to be conducted, we remain hopeful that steady progress will continue, and that the Commission will be able to adopt an interim management procedure for bluefin tuna by 2021.

With regard to ICCAT's work to develop management procedures more generally, the United States has tabled a working document to guide discussions at this meeting on the timelines and work needed to achieve the Commission's goals regarding MSE and Harvest Control Rules (HCR) for bluefin tuna and other priority species. The road map that the Commission first developed in 2016 is now out of date, and it is important for the Commission to have a common and clear understanding of the steps needed over the next few years, including the roles and responsibilities of the Commission and the SCRS, to stay on track to meet the organization's MSE goals. We are hopeful that this document will be updated over the course of this annual meeting to reflect an agreed way forward for each priority species.

Despite the many challenges that lie ahead this year, the United States is eager to build on the great progress made by the Commission in the Permanent Working Group for the Improvement of ICCAT Statistics and Conservation Measures (PWG) in 2018 to improve ICCAT's monitoring and control regime. We are committed to improving the safety of ICCAT observers and strongly support adoption of the Working Group on Integrated Monitoring Measures' (IMM) proposal in this regard. The United States is also tabling a proposal to strengthen the *Recommendation by ICCAT on Transshipment* (Rec. 16-15) by closing several potential loopholes that could be exploited and contribute to IUU fishing.

Lastly, it is an ongoing priority of the United States to increase transparency and accountability to allow ICCAT to achieve its conservation and management objectives. As such, we look forward to continuing to take steps in ICCAT to strengthen adherence with ICCAT measures by both members and non-members, including improving the compliance review process and taking meaningful action to address non-compliance. This year, priorities in the Compliance Committee (COC) will be to consider implementation of minimum standards for scientific observer coverage, conduct an initial review of the billfish check sheets and a full review of updates to the shark check sheets, and consider implementation of catch limits and data reporting requirements. ICCAT has faced chronic non-compliance on certain issues, including poor implementation of bycatch mitigation requirements and reporting of bycatch and recreational fishery data, and it is time to look beyond the issuance of compliance letters to address such matters. We look forward to discussion of these important issues during the COC meeting this year and to continuing the effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of that body, including thorough mechanisms, such as the check sheets, that should help create meaningful compliance outcomes.

The United States looks forward to working constructively with all ICCAT members at this meeting to achieve success on these pressing issues.