

Opening Statement of the United States of America to Panel 1

26th Regular Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas

The United States was very disappointed that in 2018 ICCAT failed to agree on a new measure to end overfishing for bigeye tuna and rebuild this heavily overfished stock. Nevertheless, the 2018 Panel 1 negotiations and the Chair's 2019 intersessional efforts to develop a draft proposal have identified many important issues that we hope will help set the stage for the adoption of a science-based rebuilding program at this year's annual meeting. Coming to an agreement this year on a rebuilding program for bigeye tuna and a comprehensive tropical tuna management measure is crucial.

Panel 1 continues to face the significant challenge of taking strong, effective measures to ensure the recovery of bigeye tuna while ensuring yellowfin and skipjack tunas do not also become overfished. These iconic species are critical to the lives and livelihoods of fishermen throughout the Atlantic basin. It has become clear that ICCAT tropical tuna measures have not been effective in recent years at achieving the Convention objective for bigeye tuna or controlling catches in line with scientific advice. Catch levels for bigeye, yellowfin, and eastern skipjack tuna stocks have been increasing unabated for many years.

The 2018 stock assessment for bigeye tuna indicated that the stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing, and ICCAT's failure to take action in 2018 has allowed overfishing to continue for another year on this significantly depleted stock. The yellowfin tuna catch has exceeded the TAC every year since its adoption in 2011, and this year's assessment demonstrated that the stock biomass has continued to decline since the 2014 assessment. Eastern skipjack tuna catch has exceeded the recommended scientific advice from 2016 through 2018 by 6%, 11%, and 28% respectively, with record high catches last year.

ICCAT has no choice but to make difficult management decisions at this meeting to end overfishing of bigeye tuna and rebuild the stock. We must also consider actions to bring yellowfin and eastern skipjack tuna catches in line with the scientific advice. If we fail bigeye tuna again and continue with the status quo, the SCRS advises that the bigeye tuna stock has a higher risk of collapse than of rebuilding. In 2018 and intersessionally in 2019, Panel 1 began working towards a meaningful and *equitable* approach to the conservation and management of tropical tunas. All CPCs must work together to ensure we can finish this work, in line with our most basic ICCAT obligations to effectively manage these stocks.

The SCRS has been clear that a key driver in the decline of bigeye and yellowfin tuna stocks has been the extremely high catches of small fish -- catches that have increased without constraint for many years. The impacts of the various fleets harvesting tropical tunas have not been equal. The SCRS analysis identified the disproportionate effect that fishing on fish aggregating devices (FADs) has had in driving down the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for both bigeye and yellowfin tuna and, at the same time, increasing the level of biomass necessary to support those lower MSY levels. As a consequence, while the United States recognizes that all fleets and gear

types have an impact on the status of tropical tuna stocks, the conservation burden for bigeye and yellowfin tunas cannot be shared equally among CPCs. Long overdue action is needed immediately to reduce the overall catch of bigeye tuna, and in particular the catch of small fish.

In facing these realities, it is critical that ICCAT adopt a rebuilding program for bigeye tuna during the 2019 annual meeting that, in line with *Recommendation on the Principles of Decision Making for ICCAT Conservation and Management Measures* (Rec. 11-13), ends overfishing immediately and rebuilds with a high probability of success within as short a time as possible. The United States continues to advocate for a 10-year rebuilding program and a TAC of 50,000 t. An essential aspect of any rebuilding program will be provisions that control FAD fishing to reduce the catch of small fish and address growth overfishing, return MSY to historical levels, and support fair and equitable fishing opportunities for all gear types. Panel 1 must also consider measures to ensure that the bigeye tuna total allowable catch (TAC) is adhered to and that other management measures will be effective, such as through quota allocations; tighter quota payback and carryover rules; and, where needed and appropriate, stronger monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) provisions and achievable, enforceable capacity controls. While we expect the focus of the Panel 1 management discussions this year to be on bigeye tuna, including the reduction of catch of small fish, yellowfin tuna clearly needs attention, too. While we note that actions taken to conserve and manage bigeye tuna could also benefit yellowfin tuna, ICCAT should also consider what steps it can take to ensure that stock does not become overfished.

The Panel 1 Chair's proposal provides a good starting point for tropical tuna negotiations to commence, and the United States looks forward to working with Panel 1 Members and the Chair to further improve it so that a consensus proposal can be developed and forwarded to the Commission for adoption during this annual meeting.