

**EXPLANATORY NOTE ON THE U.S. PROPOSAL
EXTENDING AND AMENDING REC. 17-06 FOR AN INTERIM CONSERVATION AND
MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WESTERN ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA**

(Proposal by United States)

The Recommendation by ICCAT for an Interim Conservation and Management Plan for Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna [Rec. 17-06] expires at the end of 2020. To initiate the correspondence process, the Panel 2 Chair, following the process agreed by the Commission, provided his initial views on the scientific advice. After determining that consideration of amendments to Recommendation 17-06 may be warranted, he chose to table a proposal. The Chair's proposal suggests following the 2021 TAC advice provided in Management Scenario 2 of Table 4 of the western Atlantic bluefin tuna section of the 2020 SCRS report. That table includes a number of scenarios for the three-year TAC projection period that address overfishing with at least a 50% probability. In addition, TAC advice is also provided in the Kobe II matrix presented as Table 1 in the western Atlantic bluefin tuna section of the SCRS report.

While we appreciate the Chair's effort to facilitate decision-making on the conservation and management of western Atlantic bluefin tuna for 2021, we are not able to go along with his proposal. Instead, we offer our own proposal for consideration by Panel 2, namely, the *Draft Recommendation by ICCAT Extending and Amending Rec. 17-06 for an Interim Conservation and Management Plan for Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna* (PA2_610/2020). There are two primary reasons that we cannot accept the Chair's proposal. First, we consider that CPCs should be able to consider the range of TAC advice provided by the SCRS for addressing overfishing. In that regard, the U.S. proposal does not include a proposed TAC level for 2021 at this time. We look forward to considering this matter with concerned CPCs during the correspondence period. Second, we strongly believe that a new assessment of western Atlantic bluefin tuna is needed in 2021; the U.S. proposal includes such a provision.

Our rationale for a new assessment is straightforward: there are important data treatments, scientific research, and statistical data that the SCRS was unable to take into account in the 2020 assessment. This is because of two factors. First, some of the crucial data and information that will be available in 2021 simply was not available in time for the 2020 assessment. Second, the strict update format of the 2020 assessment limited the flexibility of the SCRS to address potential data issues and their treatment in the models to ensure the most robust outcomes possible based on the data that was available.

Under the $F_{0.1}$ management strategy, catch advice is tied to recent recruitment estimates and assumptions regarding near-term future recruitment, which are informed by those estimates. Thus, the $F_{0.1}$ strategy allows for higher catches when recent recruitment is higher and reduces catches when recent recruitments are lower. The importance of having the most current and best available recruitment-related data inputs for use in the assessment is, therefore, quite clear. To that end, the SCRS has already identified that an evaluation of current abundance indices and their use in stock assessment models is needed and is planning to carry out this work in 2021. As part of that work, which is essential to both management strategy evaluation (MSE) and for stock assessment purposes, U.S. scientists have identified data treatments for the small fish indices (<145 cm) that are expected to improve the robustness of these indices in tracking relative abundance. In addition, U.S. research that was already underway before the 2020 assessment is just being completed. This research has identified changes in the distribution of the stock, and these changes should be considered in the standardization of certain abundance indices, including those providing information on recruitment. In addition to the important impacts that improved data treatments and new research could have on the assessment, a well-timed assessment in 2021 would mean that data from 2019 and 2020 could be incorporated. This is essential as it would also allow advice to reflect the most recent, higher levels of recruitment that were identified by SCRS this year but not fully accounted for in the 2020 assessment models.

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For these reasons, the United States considers that it is essential for the SCRS to conduct a new stock assessment of western Atlantic bluefin tuna in 2021. Given that important data and information were either missing or could not be fully addressed under the format of the 2020 assessment, the Commission must take the necessary steps to ensure it has the most robust scientific information possible available to it next year when it once again considers conservation and management measures for western Atlantic bluefin tuna. Furthermore, we understand the proposed assessment will not derail the current MSE schedule. To the contrary, the planned work by an SCRS subgroup to evaluate indices of abundance and their use in stock assessment models will advance that important work.

Beyond the two substantive issues of the TAC and the call for a new assessment in our proposal, the other amendments we have proposed to the operative paragraphs of Rec. 17-06 are minimal. Like the Chair's text, our proposal reflects only those paragraphs of Rec 17-06 that need revision lest they expire. The focus of the edits is to make the proposal current by revising the years associated with certain actions; to ensure clarity and consistency between paragraphs, including those related to the TAC and transfers as well as the next assessment and the work needed to support it; and to fix some grammatical errors missed in 2017.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION BY ICCAT EXTENDING AND AMENDING REC. 17-06 FOR AN INTERIM CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WESTERN ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA

(Proposal by the United States)

RECALLING the Recommendation by ICCAT for an Interim Conservation and Management Plan for Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna [Rec. 17-06];

NOTING the unprecedented situation in 2020 that has resulted in the cancellation of the ICCAT annual meeting and the need to make decisions by correspondence;

UNDERSCORING the need to ensure there is no lapse in conservation and management measures for western Atlantic bluefin tuna in 2021 but acknowledging the significant challenges associated with complex decision making by correspondence;

NOTING that the Commission will be able to more fully consider the management of western Atlantic bluefin tuna when it meets in person at its 2021 annual meeting;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the results of the 2020 western Atlantic bluefin tuna stock assessment update, including the management scenarios the SCRS provided for the three-year projection period that address overfishing with at least a 50% probability;

WELCOMING the 2021 SCRS Bluefin Tuna Workplan and the establishment of a subgroup to conduct a thorough evaluation of the current indices of abundance and their use in the stock assessment models, which is essential both to advance management strategy evaluation and for stock assessment purposes;

AWARE that evaluation of the available small fish (<145 cm) indices has already identified new data treatments, standardization methods, and treatment within the assessment models that are expected to improve the estimation of relative abundance, including for recruits;

ALSO AWARE that new research has identified changes in the distribution of the stock that may need to be accounted for in the standardization of some of the abundance indices, including those providing information on recruitment;

CONCERNED THAT the strict update format of the 2020 assessment did not provide the SCRS with enough flexibility to address potential issues with the data and their treatment in the models and thereby ensure the most robust outcomes;

SEEKING the most robust scientific information possible on the stock for consideration by the Commission at its Annual Meeting in 2021;

RECOGNIZING that advancing the schedule of the next assessment to 2021 without the constraint of a strict update format would allow the results of important ongoing scientific work to be taken into account by the SCRS and that this timing would not undermine the current management strategy evaluation schedule;

FURTHER RECOGNIZING that conducting an assessment in 2021, timed to allow the SCRS to incorporate data for 2019 and 2020, would more fully reflect the most recent, higher levels of recruitment, which the SCRS has identified but which could not be accounted for in the 2020 assessment models;

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE CONSERVATION
OF ATLANTIC TUNAS (ICCAT) RECOMMENDS THAT:

1. The *Recommendation by ICCAT for an Interim Conservation and Management Plan for Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna* [Rec. 17-06] shall be extended through 2021, with the following amendments:

a) Paragraph 1 shall be replaced with:

1. Contracting Parties and Cooperating non-Contracting Parties, Entities and Fishing Entities (CPCs) whose vessels have been actively fishing for bluefin tuna in the western Atlantic shall implement the following interim conservation and management plan for the 2021 period.

b) Paragraph 3 shall be replaced with:

3. Pending the results of the next stock assessment and/or SCRS recommendations based on the MSE process, an annual total allowable catch (TAC), inclusive of dead discards, of [X,XXX] t is established for 2021.

c) Paragraph 4 shall be replaced with:

4. The annual TAC in Paragraph 3 shall be reviewed in 2021 by the Commission based on the advice of the SCRS. CPCs shall make special efforts to prepare abundance indices and other fishery indicators and provide them to the SCRS in support of the next stock assessment.

d) Paragraphs 6(c), (d), (e), and (f) shall be replaced with:

6(c). Consistent with paragraphs 1, 3, and 6(b), the TAC for 2021 results in the following CPC specific quota allocations (not including by-catch allowances listed in 6(a)):

TAC for 2021: [X,XXX] t

United States	[X,XXX.XX] t
Canada	[XXX.XX] t
Japan	[XXX.XX] t
United Kingdom (in respect of Bermuda)	[X.XX] t
France (in respect of St. Pierre & Miquelon)	[X.XX] t
Mexico	[XXX.XX] t

In no case shall the allocation to France (in respect of St. Pierre & Miquelon) and to the United Kingdom (in respect of Bermuda) be less than 4 t each in any single year unless the fishery is closed.

6(d). Depending on availability, Mexico can transfer up to [XXX.XX] t of its adjusted quota in 2021 to Canada to support cooperative research as specified in paragraph 20.

6(e). Depending on availability, the United Kingdom (in respect of Bermuda) can transfer up to the amount of its adjusted quota in 2021 to the United States to support cooperative research as specified in paragraph 20.

6(f). Depending on availability, France (in respect of St. Pierre & Miquelon) can transfer up to the amount of its adjusted quota in 2021 to Canada to support cooperative research as specified in paragraph 20.

e) Paragraph 16 shall be replaced with:

16. The SCRS shall refine the MSE and continue testing the candidate management procedures. On this basis, in 2022, the Commission shall review the candidate management procedures and select one for adoption and implementation, including pre-agreed management actions to be taken under various stock conditions.

f) Paragraph 17 shall be replaced with:

17. In 2021, the SCRS will conduct an assessment of the western Atlantic bluefin tuna stock, including the most current available data and indices and taking into account recommendations of the Bluefin Tuna Species Group's subgroup on abundance indices as reflected in the 2021 SCRS Bluefin Tuna Workplan, and provide advice to the Commission on the appropriate management measures, approaches, and strategies, including, *inter alia*, regarding TAC levels for that stock for future years.

g) Paragraph 18 shall be replaced with:

18. In 2021, the SCRS shall provide the Commission with advice on any potential impacts due to uncertainties (including regarding the spawner-recruit relationship) of implementing an $F_{0.1}$ strategy, and, for any identified risks, advise how they could be addressed in future management decisions.

h) Paragraph 20 shall be replaced with:

20. CPCs that harvest Atlantic bluefin tuna should contribute to the research, including that being undertaken through ICCAT's GBYP. CPCs should make or continue special efforts to enhance the collection and analysis of biological samples from Atlantic bluefin tuna fisheries, such as through sample contributions to the coordinated sampling plan recommended by the SCRS. The SCRS will report to the Commission by 2021 on these efforts. In addition, it is important to continue to explore sampling and/or other approaches for enhancing, and where needed developing, accurate abundance indices for juvenile bluefin tuna. CPCs should also make special efforts to ensure complete and timely submission of any collected data to the SCRS.

2. This Recommendation amends the *Recommendation by ICCAT for an Interim Conservation and Management Plan for Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna* [Rec. 17-06].