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EDITORIAL

# AMENDMENT 7: BLUEFIN IN THE BALANCE

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ecreational fishermen, commercial-fishing interests and environmental groups seldom all see eye to eye on fisheries-management issues. So you'd hope that when groups as disparate as the International Game Fish Association, the American Bluefin Tuna Association (ABTA), traditional hand-gear commercial fishermen, and the environmental powerhouse the Pew Charitable Trusts all sign onto a letter, they'd have NOAA Fisheries' attention.

For the first time in many years, how this country manages its Atlantic bluefin tuna quota is on the table, in the form of Amendment 7 to the 2006 Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan. Changes that will affect various sectors or user groups in significant ways are likely, so the various interests have been leveraging their positions as NOAA Fisheries works on a proposal due out midsummer.

Nearly all recreational-fishing groups agree with IGFA, and share a basic position with ABTA and Pew. That's because they all support an approach to our bluefin tuna stocks that should be a no-brainer.

A very different approach comes from another group, the politically powerful Blue Water Fishermen's Association. The BWFA represents active pelagic longline fishermen. Longline fishing is certainly the most indiscriminate of high-seas fishing methods (with drift nets already widely banned), since each boat leaves behind hundreds and hundreds of untended, baited hooks.

U.S. longliners are allowed to target a variety of species — notably swordfish, yellowfin tuna and bigeye tuna — however, their bycatch is appalling. Plenty of other species of fish, including marlin and sailfish, as well as marine animals such as sea turtles and sea birds, end up hanging dead from many longliners' hooks. Even a considerable portion of the fish they target is discarded dead due to size restrictions.

Another species that longline fishing kills is bluefin tuna. Longliners are allowed to keep a quota of the bluefin they hook and land as incidental catch; once that quota is reached, they then start dumping the (mostly) dead bluefin back over as what managers call "dead discards."

While Amendment 7 concerns itself in part with the allocation of this country's bluefin quota among sectors, it also offers fishery managers a critical opportunity to improve the health of bluefin stocks.

In this country's waters, the Gulf of Mexico is the essential and exclusive spawning ground for bluefin

tuna. Longliners fish the Gulf heavily; in spring, adult bluefin are there to spawn. The longline bycatch and dead discards of bluefin are extensive and will likely increase this year as a very strong 2003 year-class of bluefin enter the Gulf.

Under current regulations, the longline fleet is permitted to continue fishing (for swords, yellowfin and bigeye), thereby killing bluefin even long after its bycatch quota is met. The vessels are required to dump these tuna overboard, mostly dead (mortality in the warm Gulf waters is very high indeed).

In simple terms, the longliners (BWFA) seek to have Amendment 7 take bluefin quota away from historic, sustainable hand-gear fishermen (using tended gear, with virtually no dead discards of nontargeted species). Longliners can claim they receive only an 8.1 percent share of the total bluefin harvest — but the tonnage of bluefin they kill and dump overboard far exceeds that 8.1 percent they can legally harvest. In short, their approach to Amendment 7 would do more damage to bluefin stocks.

I agree with the joint letter to NOAA signed by three groups mentioned at the start of this editorial, as well as nearly all nonlongline interests. Amendment 7 should focus on:

- Closing the Gulf to all surface longlining when spawning bluefin are present.
- Creating a bluefin bycatch cap for the longline fleet (so 8.1 percent really means 8.1 percent).
- Maintaining current quota allocation among sectors (and promoting rather than punishing more-selective gear types).
- Requiring longliners to retain all bluefin they catch.

NOAA Fisheries hopes to have a specific proposal (a year in the making) for Amendment 7 available for public comment by late July. What that proposed amendment will recommend remains to be seen; which groups back it will be determined accordingly. But it should have our support if it accomplishes two goals: offers fairness among sectors and, most important, improves the odds for our spawning bluefin.



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