

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 18, 2010

Dr. Jane Lubchenco  
Administrator  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric  
Administration  
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Mr. Thomas L. Strickland  
Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish,  
Wildlife, and Parks  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Dr. Lubchenco and Assistant Secretary Strickland:

In November 2009, the U.S. delegation to the International Commission on Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), led efforts that resulted in unprecedented restrictions on the harvest of Atlantic bluefin tuna, particularly in the eastern Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. ICCAT's actions at that meeting may have been inspired in part by Monaco's proposal to list the species under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). Prior to November, the U.S. took a wait-and-see position on co-sponsoring this proposal pending the outcome of the ICCAT meeting. Given the great strides ICCAT made toward sustainable management of Atlantic bluefin tuna, and the likelihood of a CITES listing leading to unintended consequences that would unfairly disadvantage U.S. fishermen and actually hinder swift recovery of the species, we ask you to refrain from supporting any petition to list the species under CITES Appendix I.

Prior to the ICCAT meeting, the Administration announced it would support but not co-sponsor Monaco's proposal, though it would reconsider this decision if ICCAT "adopts significantly strengthened management and compliance measures."<sup>1</sup> In November, ICCAT agreed to slash the quota of eastern bluefin to 13,500 metric tons for 2010 (meaning actual catch will not exceed 12,000 metric tons after accounting for penalties for quota overages in 2009), and to impose an 11-month closure for purse seine vessels. Perhaps most importantly, this new agreement also commits to a quota for 2011 that will have at least a 60 percent probability of rebuilding Atlantic bluefin populations based on the new stock assessment that will be carried out in 2010. These provisions certainly constitute "significantly strengthened management" given that previous agreements had resulted in a single year's harvest exceeding 60,000 metric tons as recently as 2005.

A CITES Appendix I listing would ban international trade in bluefin tuna by member states except those which choose to exercise an opt-out reservation. We believe this listing would ultimately prove ineffective while simultaneously causing disproportionate harm to the U.S. bluefin tuna fishery. Japan is the world's single largest importer of bluefin, and the Japanese government has a documented history of taking reservations to CITES listings of marine species, including at least seven species of whales listed under Appendix I and two species of sharks listed under

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<sup>1</sup> Statement from Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator, Announcing Support for Listing Atlantic Bluefin Tuna on International Trade Endangered Species List. October 14, 2009.




Appendix II. If Japan follows this trend and takes a reservation to a bluefin listing, it would be allowed to continue trading with other countries that also take a reservation. While the U.S. would certainly not exercise this option, other countries—including those fishing heavily on the depleted Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic stock—likely would follow Japan's lead, thereby retaining access to this lucrative market. Such action would also provide fertile ground for a black market trade of bluefin that could be legally caught by other countries and laundered through those countries that take a reservation. Thus, the most depleted portions of the fish stock would suffer increased fishing pressure to make up for the drop in supply from the U.S. and other nations that abide by the CITES listing. Meanwhile the U.S. fishermen who have led the world in conservation of the species would be excluded from this market thereby bearing the brunt of a CITES listing's economic impact.

Environmental groups and a NOAA Fisheries study<sup>2</sup> speculate that a ban on international trade could actually provide an economic boost to U.S. fishermen. We dispute this claim. The NOAA study asserts that the U.S. is a net importer of bluefin, but then goes on to make the erroneous assumption that the domestic market would be able to absorb the entirety of the U.S. catch should an international trade ban be implemented. Yet, NOAA's study fails to acknowledge the seasonality of the U.S. catch. The bulk of the U.S. bluefin harvest occurs in five months between May and October, while the demand stretches throughout the calendar year. Because the U.S. lacks adequate freezer storage facilities to preserve bluefin in such a way that it retains its quality and value, our fishermen rely on the international market to absorb the supply generated in the summer and fall months. Absent this market, the price will plummet, and our coastal communities will suffer. In today's economic climate, we cannot afford to effectively export fishing jobs to foreign nations, particularly those that lack the strong conservation standards that are a hallmark of U.S. fisheries management.

There is no question that Atlantic bluefin tuna is overfished. Last November, the international community, acting through ICCAT as the appropriate regional fishery management organization, took the necessary steps to put bluefin on an aggressive rebuilding trajectory by 2011. We laud the successful efforts of the U.S. delegation to force the hand of ICCAT by insisting on the necessary drastic reductions in catch limits. We ask that you honor those efforts to provide a sustainable future for this species by not supporting a CITES listing and giving ICCAT the opportunity to follow through on its commitment to do the right thing for the fish stock and for fishing communities.

Sincerely,



<sup>2</sup> "Potential Economic Effects of a Ban on the Trade of North Atlantic Bluefin Tuna on US Commercial Fishermen," prepared by NOAA Fisheries Service, October 2009.

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