

Testimony on H. Con. Res. 427
Given by
John E. Graves

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members of Congress, fellow witnesses, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am pleased to testify before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife, and Oceans on House Resolution 427. I have a keen personal interest in Atlantic highly migratory species, and for almost two decades I have been actively involved in research and management of these impressive animals. For the past seven years I have served as Chairman of the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee and this October will be my eighth consecutive trip to the annual ICCAT meeting as a coordinator of the U.S. delegation. It is in this capacity that I wish to address you today.

Last November the ICCAT meeting ended in a meltdown. On the last day, the United States refused to agree to a binding recommendation that would allow gross overfishing of bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean to continue. Our actions precipitated a series of events that resulted in the meeting ending without adoption of most management measures, leaving control of many fisheries in limbo. Fortunately, panel reports – and their management provisions – were subsequently adopted by mail. The U.S. delegation did not take its actions lightly. For years, the Commission has been presented with ICCAT management measures that condone overfishing, often at the eleventh hour of the meeting. The United States has agreed to such proposals simply to preserve consensus and to ensure that some management measure remains in effect. But last year there was unanimity among the U.S. delegation that in the case of the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock of bluefin tuna, no recommendation was better than the irresponsible recommendation that was proposed. It was hoped that the breakdown of the ICCAT process would raise awareness back in the United States of problems within the Commission, and spur the Administration to promote bilateral negotiations with certain recalcitrant parties prior to this year's meeting. Such direct interactions might facilitate the adoption of more meaningful management measures by the Commission. I am pleased that this Subcommittee has taken note that ICCAT is in trouble, as are many of the stocks under its collective management.

I strongly support the spirit and intent of House Resolution 427. For several years, a priority for the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee has been to obtain multilateral authorization for unilateral trade actions promoting compliance with Commission conservation recommendations. I recently convened four regional meetings of the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee, and I cannot adequately express the indignation and outrage many of the public felt when they found out that the United States cannot stop the importation of more fish from a nation than its annual ICCAT quota. Not only does this non-compliance erode the resource and slow recovery plans, but the extra imported product depresses the domestic market for U.S. fishermen who do abide by ICCAT conservation measures.

It was therefore very gratifying for all of us on the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee to see ICCAT adopt a resolution last year that directs member and non-member nations to refrain from engaging in the transaction and transshipment of Atlantic highly migratory species from IUU vessels, or vessels fishing out of compliance with ICCAT recommendations. It is our hope that this resolution will provide one mechanism to promote the conservation of ICCAT species and protect the interests of our fishermen.

Atlantic marlin certainly merit high priority at next month's ICCAT meeting; however, I feel that making

them the Commissioners' highest priority could potentially limit our effectiveness. There are many critical items on the agenda at this year's meeting. During 2002, ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics has conducted stock assessments of white marlin, western Atlantic bluefin tuna, eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean bluefin tuna, North Atlantic swordfish, South Atlantic swordfish, and they are currently assessing bigeye tuna. Based on the outcomes of these assessments, new management measures and – in some cases – quota allocations, will have to be negotiated. As the United States has interests in all of these stocks, narrowing our focus or publicizing our priorities could be counterproductive.

I would also like to point out that it is quite unlikely the Commission members will be receptive to additional management measures on white marlin and blue marlin this year. A hard-fought ICCAT Recommendation requiring release of live white marlin and blue marlin from longline and purse seine fisheries went into effect in the middle of 2001. Until the impact of this management measure can be assessed (which will be a few years down the road), there will be little resolve to do more. It may be more prudent to request the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics to consider other means of reducing fishing mortality on the marlins, including determining the effects of various time/area closures. That way, if the next assessment indicates additional management measures are required to rebuild the stocks, the Commission will have the information necessary to make an immediate decision on the best course of action to pursue.

In closing, it is time for the United States to do all it can to ensure that ICCAT properly manages Atlantic highly migratory species. Our commercial and recreational fishermen have made many sacrifices to rebuild overfished stocks, and it is frustrating to see their efforts diminished by non-compliance, IUU fishing, and the continuing adoption by ICCAT of management measures that condone overfishing. The United States should not abet such activities by acting as a market for nations who do not adhere to the Commission's policies. House Resolution 427 conveys that message, and it is a good first step. But we must also follow through with high level, bilateral negotiations to reduce ICCAT's current dysfunction and to ensure conservation of the resources its member nations manage.

I thank you for your time, and on behalf of the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee, I thank you for your support.