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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of
The Honorable John Fleming, Chairman
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
At the Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2706, H.R. 3472 and H.R. 4100
Tuesday, June 19, 2012 at 2:00 p.m.

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Today, we will hear testimony on three pieces of legislation - H.R. 2706, the Billfish Conservation Act of 2011; H.R. 3472, the Pirate Fishing Vessel Disposal Act of 2011; and H.R. 4100, the Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Enforcement Act of 2011.

Two of these bills deal with illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing practices - also known as IUU fishing. IUU fishing adversely affects legitimate fishermen around the world. By overfishing, fishing in illegal areas, using illegal gear, and adversely affecting important habitat, IUU fishing practices have long-term impacts on fish stocks and on the reproductive viability of many commercially-important fisheries.

While many nations are now paying more attention to this problem, stateless vessels or vessels flying a flag of convenience fishing on the high seas continue to be a problem. This legislation would amend 9 statutes to provide for penalties against those caught engaged in IUU fishing.

To highlight this concern, as recently as last September, a stateless fishing vessel was seized by the U.S. Coast Guard in international waters more than 2500 miles southwest of Kodiak, Alaska. The vessel had more than 30 tons of squid and 54 shark carcasses on board at the time it was seized. While the capture of this vessel is the good news, the vessel turned out to be infested with rats which raised concerns about how, where and when to bring the vessel into a U.S. port for prosecution. Once that issue was dealt with, it took until June of this year to determine what to do with the vessel.

The second bill for discussion today would allow the Coast Guard to use such vessels for live-fire sinking exercises if other options such as using the vessel for educational purposes are not appropriate.

While this option would be one of several options available for the Coast Guard, it would guarantee that the vessel could never return to fishing and could not ever be used for IUU fishing again. I'm curious to hear from our witnesses today on this legislation.

The third bill deals with the harvest and sale of billfish - including a number of species of marlins and spearfish. The legislation would make it illegal to sell billfish or billfish products in the continental U.S.

Under current law, it is illegal to sell Atlantic billfish but the rules for the harvest and sale of billfish in the Pacific are different. Concern has been raised that this situation allows the black market sale of Atlantic billfish which is mislabeled as Pacific-caught billfish.

As I understand it, the primary target of this legislation is foreign commercial fishing vessels; however, some concern has been raised that the legislation might disadvantage Hawaiian fishermen and fishermen from the U.S. Insular Areas who might lose access to markets in the continental U.S. if this legislation were to become law. We will hopefully examine this concern here today with our witnesses. I also understand similar legislation moving in the Senate may have been modified to address this concern; however, I would like to continue to work with the bill's sponsor to address this concern so that the legislation controls the illegal sale of billfish, but does not disadvantage U.S. fishermen.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on all three of these bills.