

## Importance of Protection of Atlantic Billfish

My name is James Motsko and I am from Ocean City, Maryland, the “White Marlin Capitol of the World.” I am the founder and president of the White Marlin Open, the world’s largest billfish tournament. I am here today to testify about the importance of conserving the populations of Atlantic Billfish, including white marlin. It is clear that the population of billfish has been declining for quite some time, and I feel that it is extremely important that the government take all necessary steps in order to prevent billfish from becoming endangered.

There are several reasons I am concerned about the billfish populations. First, and foremost, I am a concerned recreational fisherman. I have been fishing off the coast of Ocean City since 1966. In the late 1960’s, there were a record number of billfish, primarily white marlin, caught off of Ocean City by a relatively few number of boats. When the longline industry began, in this case primarily Japanese longlining, the number of white marlin caught began to steadily decline and has continued to do so. Because of this decline, I helped to fight for the Magnuson Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, which established an exclusive economic zone for the United States. Essentially, it became illegal for any foreign vessel to fish within 200 miles of the United States. While this was a very important piece of legislation, it did not do enough to preserve the population of billfish.

Secondly, I am a concerned businessman. The White Marlin Open generates in excess of \$20 million in revenue in a one-week period every year. There are many different entities that benefit from this revenue, including the Town of Ocean City and surrounding areas, the State of Maryland, and the Federal Government. The White Marlin Open, currently in its 29<sup>th</sup> year, draws contestants from along the East Coast, as well as Texas, California, Louisiana, Hawaii, Bermuda, and Australia, with the majority of contestants coming from the Mid Atlantic states. This past summer’s event drew a record 400 boats and over 2,400 anglers, captains, and mates. Over 20,000 spectators visited Harbor Island Marina, the home of the White Marlin Open, during the one-week event to view a variety of fish being weighed in. The basic entry fee for the White Marlin Open is \$800 per boat, with crews having the option of entering different

added entry levels that range from \$100 up to a total of \$10,000. The total prize money awarded during last summer's event was over \$2,100,000. The contestants of the White Marlin Open consistently release over 98% of all white marlin caught. This is truly "the highest and best use" of this precious resource.

Longlining, a nonselective type of fishing, threatens not only the prosperity and existence of the White Marlin Open and other billfish tournaments, but the entire recreational fishing industry along the east coast. This includes boat and fishing tackle manufactures, retailers, fuel distributors, charter boat operators, marinas, hotels, restaurants, and others. Needless to say, the effects of decreasing numbers of billfish caused by longlining could be devastating to the coastal economy.

As you know, there was a petition filed with the NMFS to list the white marlin as an endangered species. NMFS estimates that the white marlin stocks are at 15% of Maximum Sustainable Yield and are officially designated as overfished. Clearly, additional conservation measures for white marlin are necessary, but a listing under the ESA is totally unwarranted considering recreational fisherman are releasing 98% of all billfish caught and there is a ban on possession of white marlin aboard U.S. commercial vessels. Such a listing could have led to a prohibition on all fishing for white marlin and would have been an absolute disaster for Ocean City, the White Marlin Open, and thousands of sport fisherman.

The white marlin is now a candidate for the ESA and will be reevaluated within the next five years. According to the NMFS, the U.S. fishery accounts for approximately 5% of the total mortality of white marlin, which is caught mostly as bycatch in international longline fisheries. The evidence is clear that the decimation of white marlin and other pelagic fisheries is due largely to the EU failing to comply with their obligations under ICCAT. The EU has consistently failed to implement binding conservation measures for marlin and they have consistently exceeded their ICCAT quotas.

For these reasons, I strongly support the resolution in question today. I feel that it is of utmost importance that the government takes all necessary steps to preserve the population of billfish, including imposing trade sanctions on non-compliant countries. While ICCAT took very appropriate steps in instituting quotas for billfish catches, the quotas do nothing to preserve billfish if they are not enforced. I feel the most effective way of enforcing quotas in non-compliant countries is to "hit them where it hurts," which is financially. It is time we hold the members of ICCAT up to their end of the bargain and force

them to follow the rules they agreed to. I fully support the petition filed by the Recreational Fishing Alliance under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 as a tool to bring the EU into compliance with ICCAT. The acceptance of this petition by USTR will give the U.S. delegation tremendous leverage to negotiate conservation measures at the ICCAT meeting in Spain this November, and could be a major breakthrough in the conservation of our highly migratory species.

I appreciate your time and hope that you consider the importance of the proposed resolution.