

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

TESTIMONY OF

JOHN E. GRAVES, Ph.D.

CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES SCIENCE

VIRGINIA INSTITUTE OF MARINE SCIENCE
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION,

WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE 18TH REGULAR MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION
FOR THE CONSERVATIONS OF ATLANTIC TUNAS

30 OCTOBER 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for providing me the opportunity today to present testimony regarding the upcoming 18th Regular Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in Dublin, Ireland. I am Dr. John E. Graves, Chair of the Department of Fisheries Science at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William and Mary. I am also Chair of the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee and have served in that capacity for the past eight years.

The U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee met from Sunday through Tuesday of this week to consider the assessments and recommendations of ICCAT's scientific body, the Standing Committee for Research and Statistics (SCRS), and to discuss a variety of issues and options that the United States could propose at this year's Commission meeting. The ICCAT Advisory Committee's informed deliberations historically provide a starting point for the development of U.S. positions at ICCAT. This year the Committee noted many items of high priority for the United States to pursue in Dublin, and it also discussed many of the challenges that we will likely face in achieving our objectives.

For the past several years we have been vocal advocates at ICCAT for conservation and sound fisheries management, but we have faced serious opposition from other members of the Commission. Late on the last day of the 2001 Commission meeting in Murcia, Spain, the United States refused to support a putative conservation recommendation for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna proposed by the European Community, a measure that would have allowed serious overfishing to continue for several years. In previous years the United States had agreed to such measures, in essence believing that a bad management measure was better than no measure at all. But this changed in 2001 when the U.S. delegation was unanimous in not supporting the proposed measure. The lack of consensus precipitated a vote from the floor, but without a quorum, the meeting ended in a meltdown, and many of the pending conservation measures had to be adopted by a mail vote.

Last year promised to be an extremely busy year for ICCAT, with assessments of western and eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna, North Atlantic and South Atlantic swordfish, bigeye tuna, and white marlin. The United States came to the Commission meeting in Bilbao, Spain, ready to propose conservation measures for each of these stocks; however, fallout from the previous year's meeting prevented us from attaining several of our objectives. Upon our arrival the U.S. Commissioners were informed that there would be limited discussion of

country positions in plenary, and that all measures would be linked in a package. If necessary, there would be votes, but it was made quite clear that the votes would not favor the U.S. positions. In order to ensure that conservation measures continued on white marlin, a species that was petitioned to be listed under the Endangered Species Act, the United States had to agree to catch limits on the other stocks that were far from our conservative targets. I must note here that it was only through the tenacity of our Commissioners that the catch limits were not higher. They did a commendable job under very difficult circumstances. Clearly, the change in meeting conduct limited our ability to influence conservation measures for several stocks.

The U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee is concerned about the general lack of compliance by several parties to binding ICCAT conservation measures. For the past six years a major focus of the U.S. delegations to ICCAT has been to develop, implement, and fine-tune a transparent process that ensures compliance with Commission catch limits, size limits, and other conservation measures. Each year parties are to submit their compliance tables prior to the start of the Commission meeting. Compliance with this requirement has been abysmal. Only a few tables are available at the start of the meeting, and many that are submitted late do not contain the information necessary to evaluate compliance. This is especially true for determining compliance with minimum size limitations. It would appear that a member can simply avoid compliance by not submitting the required data.

The effects of the failure to submit data in a timely manner, if at all, is not limited to the Compliance Committee. It is a problem that is undermining the very foundation of ICCAT. Over the past few years the lack of data has compromised several stock assessments by ICCAT's Standing Committee for Research and Statistics. Without such data, scientists are forced to make estimates about the total landings and size composition for non-reporting countries. This adds considerable uncertainty to the stock assessment and the resulting scientific advice that is critical for effective fisheries management. Of even greater concern is the realization that some countries may be submitting data of dubious quality. The Commission must ensure compliance with the timely submission of accurate data -- the most fundamental responsibility for any nation that is a member of ICCAT.

Despite the many challenges ICCAT faces, it has made considerable progress over the past several years and the United States has played a major role in these advances. These include the rebuilding of the North Atlantic swordfish stock, the implementation of a compliance regime, and the development of positive and negative fishing vessel lists that will close foreign markets to those who engage in illegal fishing practices. To be sure, progress is frustratingly slow at ICCAT, but it is the only game in town and we have to make it work.

This year we will be taking a well-honed team to Dublin. The three U.S. Commissioners have proven to be determined and tireless negotiators for the U.S. positions. They will be supported by a competent and dedicated staff comprising individuals from NMFS, NOAA, the Department of State, and the U.S. ICCAT Advisory Committee. We will undoubtedly encounter stiff opposition in the pursuit of our objectives, but when the dust has finally settled I fully expect that we will once again have made progress towards the conservation and sound management of these pelagic resources.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.