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TESTIMONY OF

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION,

WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

OCTOBER 30, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to present testimony on issues facing the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) at its Eighteenth Regular meeting, to be held in Dublin, Ireland, on November 17-24, 2003. I am Dr. William T. Hogarth, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). I am also the U.S. Government Commissioner to ICCAT.

On September 11th of this year, a member of my staff, John H. Dunnigan, testified before this body on international fisheries issues. Many of the issues raised during that hearing concerned ICCAT and are still germane. Rather than repeating earlier testimony, today I will focus more narrowly on what I see as the major issues for the upcoming ICCAT meeting.

Before getting into the specifics of the 2003 ICCAT agenda, I would like to make a few general comments about the Commission. ICCAT's membership has grown dramatically in the last few years, due in large part to the successful efforts of the organization to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. The increased use of total allowable catches to control fisheries and the development of quota allocation arrangements have also created incentives for countries to join the Commission. The United States is encouraged by this growth since it indicates that ICCAT is expanding its influence over Atlantic highly migratory species fisheries. In addition to increased membership, the Commission has also been contending with a significant expansion of its annual workload. Currently, the Commission meets for 8 days in the fall, in addition to convening a number of intersessional meetings throughout the year. To support this workload, ICCAT members must expend increasing amounts of time and energy. With this growth in membership and workload come greater challenges for the organization, and progress on some issues can be slower than we would like. On a more positive note, ICCAT will be considering ways to improve the functioning of its meetings this fall, and we have made a number of suggestions in this regard.

For the upcoming 2003 ICCAT Regular Meeting, the Commission will once again have a full agenda. Stock issues include albacore, bigeye, and yellowfin tunas, and Mediterranean swordfish. Due to U.S. insistence last year, ICCAT will convene a working group on November 15 to begin to seriously examine the issue of integrated bluefin tuna management. This is an extremely important issue to the U.S., since the data are clear that the east and west stocks of bluefin tuna overlap and our current management approach does not adequately take this biological reality into consideration. ICCAT must find ways to appropriately integrate the management of these two interdependent stocks. We expect that the first working group meeting will set out a structure for future work, which will include identifying and evaluating various management options and identifying needed research. We understand that the Commission will also be considering a recommendation from its science body to invest in a comprehensive, coordinated bluefin tuna research program that is intended to provide a basis for providing scientific advice on the risks and robustness of potential revised management procedures for bluefin tuna.

Another critical issue facing ICCAT this year is the election of a new Executive Secretary. There are currently five candidates, one of which is from the United States. I consider the U.S. candidate, Dr. Joseph Powers, to be the strongest candidate in the field. ICCAT needs a strong leader to ensure that the Secretariat can meet the challenges associated with the increasing Commission membership, rising number of conservation and management decisions, and dramatically expanding workload. I believe that the strong scientific and management credentials of Dr. Powers make him the perfect candidate for this position. The EC will be supporting their own candidate and they have made it known that they feel they should hold other positions of power within the Commission. While we feel that the EC certainly has an important role to play in ICCAT, we strongly believe that there must be equity within the Commission with regards to its administrative and political leadership.

A third area of focus this year concerns data. The Commission is facing a critical period. For some stocks, data are so inadequate or are reported so late that ICCAT's science body, the Standing Committee for Research and Statistics (SCRS), cannot conduct robust stock assessments. To make matters worse, bluefin tuna farming has made data collection and verification even more difficult for that species. Without good data we cannot effectively manage ICCAT stocks. The obligation to collect and report data is no different than the obligation to abide by a conservation measure. If countries are not reporting, intentionally misreporting, or reporting so late that the SCRS cannot do its job, ICCAT should deal with the issue as a compliance matter. This approach would be possible, since the allocation criteria developed by ICCAT in 2001 already link quota access to data reporting. Regarding farming, we will support efforts to ensure that there is a proper accounting of the fish entering and leaving these farming operations. ICCAT recently held a workshop to identify data collection and reporting problems and solutions, which did help to advance the debate. We are considering ways to address data issues in ICCAT, including those discussed at the recent workshop.

In addition, you might recall that the United States has expressed concern in the past about lax data collection and reporting by the EC. At the 2002 ICCAT meeting, the EC agreed to measures to improve their data collection programs. Two weeks ago, we met with our EC counterparts and discussed their progress on this matter. While they assured us that efforts were underway to improve the data situation, they were not able to provide specifics. I will continue to seek that information over the coming weeks and months. This is an important issue that will factor into a future decision concerning a request to certify the EC under the Pelly Amendment to the Fishermen's Protective Act. Similarly, I will also be seeking specific information from the EC regarding conservation measures that have been adopted by ICCAT to reduce that harvest of undersized bluefin tuna. At the urging of the United States, ICCAT adopted bluefin tuna measures last year to increase the absolute minimum size in the Mediterranean from 3.2 kg to 4.8 kg and, for the Atlantic and Mediterranean, reducing the number of fish that can be retained below 6.4 kg. ICCAT also is requiring the development of plans setting out how reductions in the harvest of undersized bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean will be achieved.

A fourth area of focus at ICCAT this year is compliance. Compliance issues have been and will continue to be one of the highest priority areas for the United States at ICCAT. Since it is included in earlier testimony, I will not repeat all the gains we have made in this area to date. The bottom line is that we believe more needs to be done. In addition to improving the implementation of existing measures, the overall compliance regime process should be streamlined and the scope broadened to improve the use of our trade and quota penalty tools. For example, the existing quota penalty provisions should be expanded to cover all species under quantitative harvest restriction, including marlins. In the same vein, we support efforts to improve ICCAT's monitoring and control regime. Effective monitoring and control measures are essential for

implementation of ICCAT's rules. Proposals for establishing a vessel monitoring system program and spelling out flag state duties are pending before the Commission this year. Other monitoring and control matters will also be addressed in future years.

The other two U.S. Commissioners and I recently met with our European, Japanese, and Canadian counterparts to exchange views on the issues facing ICCAT this year. In addition, earlier this week we met with the Advisory Committee to the U.S. Section to ICCAT to obtain their advice on the matters I have raised here. These are critical steps in the U.S. position development process. The timing of this hearing is such that the final U.S. positions have not yet been set, but I have tried to indicate our general views in the major areas of discussion for the upcoming meeting. Undoubtedly, there will be other matters that arise at ICCAT, and each ICCAT member will have a different perspective on what is important. This is the nature of regional fisheries management organizations. For ICCAT, this is starkly true given the fact that the organization now has 37 members representing both developing and developed states. Despite these challenges, I believe progress can be made on the issues outlined above. In that regard, I look forward to the support of those Congressional members and staff who will be joining the U.S. delegation in Ireland this year.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to review the issues that will be facing ICCAT in November 2003. This concludes my testimony, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions that Members of this Subcommittee may have. Thank you very much.

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