



Commission agrees to cut tuna catches in Pacific

By MICHAEL CASEY – 2 hours ago

BANGKOK, Thailand (AP) — A commercial fishing commission agreed Friday to cut the catches of bigeye tuna in parts of the Pacific Ocean, a small step in an effort to save a threatened species that is a favorite among sushi lovers.

But environmentalists lambasted the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission's decision to reduce catches by only 10 percent in each of the next three years. They wanted an immediate 30 percent reduction that scientists advising the body had recommended.

"Commissions charged with protecting tuna populations are proving completely ineffective and inadequate," said Mark Stevens, senior program officer at the World Wildlife Fund. "If they are willing to ignore the advice of their own scientists then we can have little faith in their ability to prevent the demise of this species."

The commission represents 34 member countries and territories and is responsible for regulating commercial fishing in the region, which stretches from Hawaii to Asia and as far south as Australia.

Commission Chairman Glen Hurry said the agreement reached Friday in Busan, South Korea, was not perfect but was a "step in the right direction."

"I get 30 percent over three years. I am OK with that," Hurry said regarding the plan that requires reductions of 10 percent in 2009 with similar cuts planned for 2010 and 2011.

It was not immediately clear how the cuts would be guaranteed.

Hurry said the measures adopted would be reviewed next year and possibly toughened based on scientific evidence "if these don't seem to be delivering the right result."

The commission also agreed to ban huge floating or sunken platforms known as fish aggregating devices for two months in 2009 and three months in 2010. It also voted to bar fishing fleets from two high seas areas near Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands that are currently not under the jurisdiction of any country.

These measures would likely help bigeye as well as yellowfin tuna populations because they swim together as juveniles.

The reductions are probably the most far-reaching announced by any of the several bodies tasked with regulating tuna fishing around the world.

But since each commission comes up with its own set of rules and they often conflict, conservation of a globe-trotting species like tuna is made even more difficult. The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, for example, failed to agree last month on any measures to conserve depleted yellowfin and bigeye tuna in the Eastern Pacific.

Anouk Ride, a spokeswoman for the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency, which represents 17 countries and territories including Australia and New Zealand, said the final agreement reached Friday was a good compromise.

Ride said the commission had a "difficult battle" with the United States, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the European Union, which fought against many of the measures.

"But at the end of the day, cooperation was reached," she said. "It will definitely make a difference in efforts to reduce fishing and result in commitments to manage the fishery better."

The Western and Central Pacific region accounts for 55 percent of the world's tuna production with a value of \$4 billion to \$5 billion. But tuna stocks in the region have fallen since the 1960s, driven down by increasing numbers of industrial fishing fleets.

"The general consensus among scientists is that the stocks of bigeye and yellowfin in the Western and Central Pacific are doing relatively better than those of the Mediterranean bluefin tuna, for example," Rashid Sumaila, the acting director of the Fisheries Centre at the

University of British Columbia, said in an e-mail interview.

"But there are warning signs that these stocks are heading the way of not only Mediterranean bluefin tuna but also more serious collapses such as that of northern cod off Newfoundland," he said.

The population of northern cod — a fish once at the center of the economies of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada — collapsed in the early 1990s and has yet to recover, even though fishing for the species has been banned since 1992.

Stevens warned that allowing the bigeye population to dip any lower could be disastrous, though he said the lack of accurate catch data from fishing nations made it difficult to set a time frame.

"We are killing too many fish for the bigeye to reproduce and maintain constant levels," he said. "If fishing continued at this rate, the population would collapse."