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A Lower Catch Limit For Tuna, But Is It Low Enough?

Over the weekend, an international commission meeting in Brazil voted to sharply reduce the fishing quota for bluefin tuna, but biologists say the step probably doesn't go far enough to save the species. Bluefin tuna is one of the most valuable fish in the sea. A single fish can fetch \$100,000 at market before it's cut into sushi.

Every year since its inception in 1969, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas gets together to set fishing limits for the bluefin tuna. And every year the commission has ignored the advice of its own scientists. It's under heavy pressure from the fishing industry, to catch far more fish than the scientists say is safe.

Danger For The Fish and The Fisheries

But this year, for a change, the commission suggested a quota that falls within the range of their scientists' advice. And Jane Lubchenco, who heads the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, says this new quota is a significant improvement.

"But it does not go far enough. It's insufficient to guarantee either the fish, or the fishery," said Lubchenco of this year's number.

As a biologist, Lubchenco is passionate about bluefin tuna. And as the nation's chief fishing regulator, she also has a responsibility to protect the species from being fished to commercial extinction.

"Bluefin tuna are spectacular creatures and we have a responsibility to ensure their survival. We also understand the survival of the fishery depends on having healthy populations of fish," she says.

How Low Should It Go?

The latest deal establishes a new, lower fishing quota, and also sets new rules designed to reduce overfishing. Even so, the commission itself figures even if these rules are followed, there's only a 60 percent chance that the species will recover by the year 2023.

According to Lubchenco, "that's not a high probability, but it's much better than the current probability."

The chances of recovery are based on the assumption that fishermen will actually keep to the quotas that have been negotiated. Joseph Powers at Louisiana State University is a science advisor to the tuna commission. And he says the new quota looks OK — at least on paper.

"If, in fact, that were perfectly implemented, then yes, you would start to begin the long recovery process," he says.

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But the fisheries, particularly around Europe, have a dreadful track record in implementing tuna quotas. Susan Lieberman at the Pew Environment Group says some European nations do a very poor job of enforcing the quotas.

“There’s a lot of illegal fishing going on, again particularly in the Mediterranean,” says Lieberman.

She says fishermen sometimes catch twice as many fish as they are allowed to under the formal quotas. So even though the tuna commission has finally paid attention to its scientists on eastern bluefin tuna, Lieberman is still very discouraged.

“I would say it’s not really so much a turning point, as a baby step in the right direction. I don’t know if the bluefin tuna has enough time for all the little, tiny steps — but it’s better than nothing,” she says.

Lieberman says the commission probably went as far as it did, because conservation groups, including hers, are trying to get bluefin tuna protected as an endangered species under a treaty called CITES. The government of Monaco has made it a formal proposal.

U.S. Action Unclear

Commissioners hoped they could forestall that action if they took serious enough steps at this meeting. The U.S. government strongly supports Monaco’s efforts to ban the bluefin tuna trade entirely. But today NOAA’s Lubchenco was a bit noncommittal about what that means exactly.

“Because the meetings have just concluded, we haven’t had time to consult within the U.S. government and to decide what our next steps are. We’re going to be doing that very soon,” she said.

Those next steps for the U.S. will be determined at the next crucial meeting for the bluefin tuna in March. Copyright 2009 National Public Radio

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