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NOAA chief called 'sellout' on tuna limits

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NOAA chief administrator Jane Lubchenco, who last week told an international conference the U.S. favors a reduced fishery in Atlantic bluefin tuna, is being accused of "selling out U.S. fishermen" by Sen. Olympia Snowe.

Massachusetts' hub fishing ports, Gloucester and New Bedford, both include a number of bluefin permit holders. And Times columnist Peter Prybot has been reporting this fall on an unsurpassed season of bluefin fishing along Georges Bank, documented by Gloucester fishermen who landed some of the catch.

But the Pew Environment Group and other large-scale environmental groups have held to the belief that the bluefin is on the verge of extinction.

Lubchenco, who heads the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, issued her statement on her arrival in Paris to head the U.S. delegation to a pivotal meeting of ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

Lubchenco cited the "uncertainty in science" about the state of the stock in the Western Atlantic — which is evaluated independently by the ICCAT from the Eastern stock — and said she believes it is "important to err on the side of caution" and seek a lower total allowable catch than the 1,800 metric tons that was allowed and caught in the Western Atlantic this year.

In previous years, Western Atlantic fishermen failed to land the allowable catch.

The most recent stock report by ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics distinguished between the relatively lawless eastern Atlantic bluefin fishery and the more responsible western fishery, which is partially based in Gloucester.

In it, the committee repeatedly modified its tentative conclusions with reference to uncertainty, but — using the "scenario" or model employed over time to discuss the Western stock — the committee asserted that an increased quota, up from 1,800 metric tons to 2,500 metric tons, the stock would have a 78.2 percent likelihood of achieving maximum sustainable yield over the next decade.

The status quo catch limit, 1,800 creates a likelihood of maximum sustainable yield of just under 95.8 percent.

Snowe, a Maine Republican, and ranking member of the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard, ripped Lubchenco for betraying New England and U.S. fishermen who have worked effectively to rebuild western bluefin stocks.

"By suggesting that reductions in total allowable catch of bluefin tuna are warranted in both the Eastern and Western Atlantic, NOAA is effectively selling out US fishermen who for years have adhered to strict catch limits and conservation measures now proven to have boosted the health of the bluefin population," Snowe said.

"Our fishermen operate under the world's strictest management regime, and their sacrifices are largely responsible for the optimism found in the most recent scientific assessment for western Atlantic bluefin," she said. "The U.S. fishery lacks the rampant over-harvest, under-reporting and tuna ranching operations that have led to such a dramatic decline in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean ... To suggest our fishermen should be punished ... is uncalled for and inappropriate."

Because of the difference in time between Gloucester and Paris, NOAA said it would be impossible to get a reaction from Lubchenco by deadline Tuesday night.

ICCAT is expected to begin formal debate on new catch limits after Thanksgiving. The convention concludes Saturday.

The meeting convened with conservation forces, led by the Pew Environment Group, urging protection equivalent to endangered species status for the biggest of the tunas — the alpha of predators and the sushi

of sushis — qualities that have created powerful conflicts over policy between eastern and western Atlantic nations and fierce clashes between conservationists and fishermen.

There are two stocks of the great fish, but they inter-mingle, making scientific understanding and assessment difficult.

Along the European shores of the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean Sea, fleets traditionally have flouted conservation conventions and used seine nets to herd immature bluefin together, where they are ranched and artificially fattened and harvested for sale.

A report last week by an International Consortium of Investigative Journalists — funded by Pew and allied groups — asserted that one in three bluefin landed from the Mediterranean was caught illegally from 1997 to 2007. The consortium found numerous examples of fraud and cheating to beat the ICCAT system in the East.

The western Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery was not attacked in the report and has been considered by ICCAT to be far more responsible and reliable.

Yet Susan Lieberman, director of international policy at Pew Environment Group and the head of Pew's delegation to the ICCAT meeting, has called for a shutdown of the bluefin fisheries worldwide.

"Until Atlantic bluefin populations begin to rebuild and ICCAT countries can address these reporting problems, the fishery must be suspended.

"Crystal ball management is no way to ensure the future of one of the most sought-after fish in the ocean," said Lieberman, who had been chief of the Division of Scientific Authority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for managing and monitoring endangered species.

World Wildlife Fund joined Pew in promoting the findings of the investigative journalists.

"The revelations ... of exhaustive investigation confirm WWF's repeated warnings about widespread illegalities rippling through the supply chain of the Mediterranean and East Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery and trade," said Sergi Tudela, head of fisheries at WWF Mediterranean.

Snowe, meanwhile, led a group of 10 New England senators and representatives who wrote to Lubchenco on Nov. 18 urging her to support aggressive compliance with the ICCAT management program and a "modest" increase in the quota for the Western Atlantic.

"The 2010 stock assessment," Snowe and her colleagues wrote, "has provided policy-makers an opportunity to demonstrate to fishermen that, when strict conservation measures result in scientifically-based estimates of positive rebuilding trends and show (that) an increase in harvest is sustainable, they will be rewarded for their sacrifice."

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