

WCPFC Statement to the 45th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting

The Honorable Tommy Remengesau, President of Palau and Chair of the Forum, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Honorable Forum Leaders, Heads of Regional Agencies and Distinguished Guests.

Thank you again for the invitation to address this year's Pacific Islands Forum, on the tuna fishery in the WCPO.

Stock Status

The preliminary 2013 catch information shows a total catch of the key tuna species of 2,621,471 tonnes. This catch is estimated to give a first point of sale value of around \$6 billion USD. From this the income to Pacific island countries is estimated to be in the order of \$350-400 million being a combination of domestic activity, fishing licenses and sale of vessel days.

Table 1

Skipjack	Yellowfin	Bigeeye	Albacore	Total
1,784,091 mt	535,656 mt	158,662 mt	143,102 mt	2,621,471 mt

This year the SPC-OFP has undertaken stock assessments for three of our main fish stocks, skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye tuna. These assessments were made using fishery data up to and including 2012. This advice from the SPC, while preliminary in nature, will go to the annual Science meeting for further discussion next week.

There are two important management terms included in today's presentation that will become familiar to you and they are target and limit reference points and both are usually expressed in terms of a percentage of the original or unexploited biomass of the spawning stock in the fishery (SB_0). A target reference point is ideally where you would like your stock level to be to ensure the maximum and most profitable catch levels. A limit reference point is somewhere you don't want to go, and if you find yourself there you need to take very serious and decisive action.

In 2013, the Commission adopted limit reference points for the four main tuna species of 20% of their original spawning biomass. At this stage we have no target reference points; however the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) have indicated that they wish to adopt a target reference point for skipjack of 50% of the original spawning biomass.

In order to have a low risk (e.g. 5%) of falling below the limit reference point, you actually need to ensure that your best estimate of the number of spawning fish is much higher than this 20%, most likely 35-40% of the original level. The reason for this is that

the stock assessment is not an exact science and this means that there is always some uncertainty in the outcomes and as such you need to establish a reasonable buffer.

Skipjack

The 2014 assessment is likely to show that skipjack is approximately 50% of the unexploited spawning biomass (SB₀). This represents a reasonably healthy situation biologically.

However, to support the PNA in its endeavor for a target reference point of 50% for skipjack, the Commission in 2014 has to adopt management measures to stabilize the levels of catch and fishing effort. This will likely mean a reduction over time from current fishing levels to counter the increasing vessel numbers and as technology continues to increase the catching power of vessels.

Should the Commission decide not to take action and the number of purse seiners continues to increase, the skipjack stock will likely decline to a level where vessels have to fish harder to maintain catch levels and artisanal catches by small scale boats for local markets decline, impacting food security.

Yellowfin tuna

The 2014 assessment is showing that yellowfin tuna is now approximately 38% of the original spawning biomass, down from 44% in 2011. As such yellowfin tuna is likely to be in the required buffer zone to ensure stocks do not go below the 20% limit.

To ensure that the yellowfin stock remains at a safe and productive level, the Commission would need to take action this year to stabilize the catch. It should be noted however, that current levels of fishing effort continue to put downward pressure on this stock therefore continuing to fish at this rate will only continue to drive the stock down further.

Bigeye tuna

The 2014 assessment shows that bigeye tuna is now estimated to be 16% of the original spawning biomass down from 21% in 2011. This means that the current level of spawning stock in the fishery is below the agreed limit reference point of 20% of the original spawning stock and well below any reasonable and safe level. This valuable stock is now classified as over fished and subject to continued overfishing.

This is the first time that one of the four main commercial Western and Central Pacific Ocean tuna stocks has been classified as overfished.

Pacific Bluefin

Pacific bluefin tuna, which is fished largely in Japanese, Korean, USA/Mexican and at times NZ waters, is heavily overfished with estimates that it is at 3% of its spawning biomass and also needs urgent and decisive action.

The Commission this year no longer has a choice about taking action in relation to bigeye and pacific bluefin tuna; it can no longer ignore its mandate of conserving and managing highly migratory fish stocks as these stocks are overfished. As such it must agree and implement real measures to reduce the catch of bigeye and pacific bluefin and rebuild the stocks to safe and sustainable levels.

Southern Albacore tuna

There was no new stock assessment for southern albacore tuna in 2014. Longline fishing effort in the South Pacific and albacore catches have increased greatly over the past five years. While the best estimate of the overall biological condition of the stock remains at an acceptable level, there is considerable uncertainty due to a lack of reliable data and because of this there is some risk that the current levels of catch and effort could push the stock below the limit reference point.

Continuing increases in vessel numbers and capacity

There are now 300 large-scale, purse seine vessels fishing in this fishery. This is up from 225 vessels in 2004. Most of these new boats are from 55 to 75 metres long. Industry advice is that some 37 new purse seiners are under construction in Asian ship yards with 17 to enter our fishery over the next 12-24 months. In addition to member countries of the WCPFC indicated earlier this year that they plan to scrap 78 of the current purse seine vessels in our fishery and replace them with new vessels.

These new and replaced vessels will be well equipped with advanced technology and as such have greater fishing power. They are also, with almost no exception much larger than the vessels they are replacing. In addition they now deploy FADs with sonar buoys on them that allow you to see how many fish are under each FAD you have deployed and to direct fishing activity in a more targeted way. The impact of these advancements in technology and FADs on fish stocks, while of concern now will become obvious in the future.

Sharks

Given the interest a number of you have in the management of shark species and creation of shark sanctuaries, the Commission along with its eastern Pacific counterpart, the IATTC, has been granted five years of funding by the Global Environment Fund (GEF) to improve the data and information collected on sharks species and for us to get to the point where we can undertake assessments of all the main shark species caught. The Commissions view is that we need to better understand these species in order to manage them effectively and as such we need better information on catch by species and a better understanding of their biology. For those of you with sanctuaries, it would help us greatly

if we could have reliable information on shark catches and in particular shark discards to help with our assessments and subsequent management advice to you.

The take home messages from today are:

- 1 The 2014 assessments are based on fishery data up to 2012. We do not know the impacts of the last two years of fishing so there remains a level of uncertainty about what our world really looks like but indications are that catches have not reduced;
- 2 Bigeye tuna is overfished and requires urgent management action;
- 3 Yellowfin tuna is at 38% of the original stock biomass and requires stabilisation;
- 4 We urgently need to agree and implement a target reference point for skipjack to retain the stock at optimal levels; and
- 5 We have too many boats in this fishery and more are coming in. We must agree on arrangements to restrict fishing effort and boats to a more sustainable level and do it now and not tomorrow.

Strong actions, taken now, for the management of your tuna stocks which prevent spawning stock levels falling further will give us the best opportunity to provide important equity in this fishery for future generations of Pacific Island people.

Chair, I feel like I come here each year and rain on your parade and probably tell you things you would prefer not to hear about our tuna fishery, but I have always felt that my job is to be honest with you about this important fishery and on the back of the current scientific evidence from the SPC, we have a few issues we need to address before they become major problems for all of us.

In closing thank you all for your valuable time and as always, a special thanks to President Mori and the people of the Federated States of Micronesia for hosting our Commission.

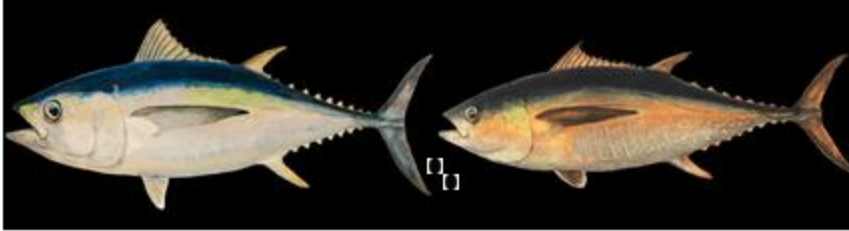
Professor Glenn Hurry
Executive Director, WCPFC

Key Tuna Species

(Catch in the WCPO in 2013; Total = 2,621,471 mt)

Bigeye Tuna (158,662 mt)

Yellowfin Tuna (535,656 mt)



Skipjack Tuna (1,784,091 mt)

Albacore Tuna (143,102 mt)



