



August 27, 2018

Mr. Phil Anderson, Chair  
Pacific Fishery Management Council  
7700 NE Ambassador Place, #101  
Portland, OR 97220

Agenda Item H.6: Swordfish Management and Monitoring Plan

Dear Chair Anderson:

Wild Oceans, the International Game Fish Association, Coastal Conservation Association of California and American Sportfishing Association represent recreational fishermen and business who want to promote innovative, sustainable, commercial fishing gear. In June, the Council decided to review the Swordfish Management and Monitoring Plan (Plan) and adopt revisions as necessary to further articulate the Council's vision and future actions for the west coast swordfish fishery. We ask the Council to adopt a Plan that prioritizes the authorization of actively tended swordfish gear to maximize the economic value of Pacific swordfish while minimizing bycatch, the ecological footprint and management costs and oversight.

When considering the "Actions to Be Taken Under the Plan", **we ask you to dedicate your limited resources towards researching, authorizing, and subsidizing actively-tended commercial gear that brings prize fish to market while drastically limiting bycatch.** Although fishermen in the Atlantic have successfully used buoy gear to target swordfish, deep-set buoy gear (DSBG) and its descendent, linked buoy gear (LBG), are not yet allowable gear in the Pacific. The Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research has tested and modified the gear, confirming that: 1) swordfish can be selectively targeted at depth with minimal bycatch, 2) non-target catch of species of concern are minimal and 3) when an unwanted species is caught, fishermen can quickly identify and release the animal alive. In addition, swordfish caught on DSBG and LBG are of high quality and received by southern California markets at a premium price. DSBG catch composition is over 98 percent targeted catch, consisting primarily of swordfish.

In addition, fostering a fishery that focuses on actively tended gear compliments the historic harpoon fishery. At its peak in 1978, the harpoon fishery landed 1,699 metric tons of swordfish. The fishery is exclusive to areas, such as the southern California Bight, where waters are calm and swordfish fin at the surface. DSBG

fishermen regularly spot finning swordfish while tending their gear. Using DSBG or LBG and harpoon in tandem will likely increase harpoon caught swordfish, providing a valuable supplement. The Plan should promote the expansion of harpoon caught swordfish as a necessary component of an environmentally sustainable and economically profitable swordfish fishery.

**We strongly oppose further consideration of a longline fishery inside or outside the West Coast exclusive economic zone.** The evidence is overwhelming that longlines do not conform to our sustainability goals. They are an extremely wasteful method of fishing, incapable of limiting what they catch to the targeted species. Senselessly squandering precious ocean resources is too high a price to pay to permit their use in the Pacific.

Any move to authorize non-selective longline gear will collide with our national commitment to protect marine life such as billfish, sea turtles, seabirds and marine mammals. For example, earlier this month, President Trump signed into law a bill that made technical amendments to the Billfish Conservation Act of 2012 that ensure it will be implemented as Congress originally intended. This law now clearly prohibits the importation or sale of billfish (except swordfish) in the mainland United States (it provides an exception for billfish caught and landed in Hawaii and the Pacific territories). The Act affirms that billfish contribute far more to the U.S. economy as recreational species (with virtually all fish released alive) than they do as commercial species. Any California based longline fishery would result in discarded striped marlin, blue marlin and shortbill spearfish.

A West Coast longline fishery will also interact with many species with unknown stock status, including mahi mahi, shortbill spearfish, moonfish, pomfret and wahoo. We lack sufficient data to manage these stocks in a manner that prevents overfishing or achieves rebuilding goals.

**We ask you to prioritize ways to limit effort in the drift gillnet (DGN) fishery and to minimize bycatch rates.** Ultimately, we support a transition away from drift gillnets, a gear that indiscriminately removes the ocean's top predators in a manner and in numbers that the fishery cannot control. For example, in 2017 the U.S. commercial fishery for Pacific bluefin tuna was closed after the fishery exceeded the 2017 catch limit of 425 mt. However, drift gillnets could not avoid bluefin tuna. In the fall of 2017, the gear caught and the fishermen discarded tons of dead Pacific bluefin tuna.

In the meantime, we ask the Council to seize the opportunity to reduce latency in the DGN fleet. With the authorization of a Federal DGN permit, the Council can choose to retire excess permits including those who do not actively participate in the drift gillnet fishery. Exploring ways to leverage Federal DGN permits to reduce bycatch should be prioritized above other efforts to expand DGN access.

In 2015, the Council adopted hard caps on the DGN fishery to further minimize bycatch of sea turtles and marine mammals. Last year, NMFS disallowed the regulations. The denial should not end the Council's commitment to reducing bycatch in the drift gillnet fishery, but should encourage a discussion of implementing hard caps on critically endangered sea turtles. This is currently listed as a priority under the Plan, but is not included in the Road Map For Implementing Actions Under the Plan. We ask you to schedule this action and begin scoping an amendment to limit effort in the DGN fishery.

**In order to build a more sustainable swordfish fishery with higher economic returns and less bycatch, we ask you to incorporate performance criteria for conducting and evaluating research into the use of alternative fishing gears and methods.** Without such criteria, agreed upon in advance, assessing the results and making management decisions based on those results will be open to interpretation and likely lead to conflict among stakeholders with varying interests and priorities. In order for the public to have confidence in management decisions based on the research, the precise aims and objectives against which those results will be assessed must be developed.

Performance criteria need to go beyond the economic viability of catching swordfish and the avoidance of endangered species (i.e., reduced numbers of turtle-takes as compared with drift nets) to evaluate: 1) the ability of the proposed gear to target select species and minimize bycatch of finfish, sharks and important recreational species and 2) the costs and benefits of experimental gear. As stewards of our wild oceans, we have a responsibility to invest in more selective fishing to ensure that benefits to the public outweigh the costs. The public objects to harmful fishing methods, which it is forced to subsidize by paying the high management costs – complex regulations, intensive monitoring (including observers) and enforcement – of mitigating the damage they do to non-target species. It is time for fishery management to consider the net benefits to the nation that come with more selective gears. So-called “small-scale” fishing gears like DSBG are actually more economically productive and viable when we factor in the enormous benefits of management costs avoided.

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As fishermen, we believe that “best fishing practices” for offshore fisheries can support smaller-scale, high-yield, locally-supplied fisheries, commercial as well as recreational, using the latest technological developments in sustainable fishing. It is part of a progressive shift away from so-called modern, “efficient” methods of fishing that have proven wasteful and ultimately unmanageable. We ask you to incorporate our priorities into the Swordfish Management and Monitoring Plan.

Sincerely,



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