



International Game Fish Association

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Recommendations to the 21st Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

The International Game Fish Association (IGFA) is a non-profit organization that represents recreational anglers throughout the world. The IGFA was established in 1939, has active members in over 125 countries, is the governing body for international recreational fishing and advocacy, is accredited by the United Nations Environment Programme, and provides rules and education for ethical angling practices. Many of IGFA's members target the highly migratory species managed by WCPFC, especially marlin, sailfish and spearfish (i.e. billfish) which are primarily caught and released.

The IGFA continues to have great concern about how highly migratory species are being managed on a global level. The lack of data and accurate reporting of billfish catch is of particular concern. As an organization that is committed to the conservation of game fishes and obtaining more and improved data on them, the IGFA has deployed over 600 pop-up satellite archival tags on billfish around the world in the last thirteen years, many of which have been in waters under this organization's purview. The information gained from the [IGFA Great Marlin Race \(IGMR\)](#) is open access and available to your scientific committee and others who wish to utilize it for research and management purposes.

On October 8-10, 2024, the IGFA and Wild Oceans held the 7th International Billfish Symposium in San Diego, California. The event garnered over 100 participants from nine countries, demonstrating the devotion that our community of anglers, scientists, and managers have for these incredible species. We look forward to making the research that was presented available to the greater community by facilitating the publication of articles in a themed issue of *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, and we strongly urge the WCPFC and Science Committee to consider this critical research in future management and regulatory decisions.

IGFA Recommendations:

Recreational Fishing

Recreational angling is a continuously growing and economically vibrant entity in many countries and we urge the WCPFC to recognize both its relevance and that it may necessitate alternate management objectives than those used in commercial fisheries. The IGFA kindly offers its consultation to WCPFC on recreational fisheries issues and recommends the following to the Commission:

- Current WCPFC quota allocation and reallocation policies do not take into consideration the economic value of catch and release recreational fisheries. WCPFC contracting parties should be free to utilize quota as they desire, even if it is not fully harvested, without penalty of quota redistribution
- Managing fisheries on the basis of MSY is an excessively risk-prone approach. As such, we suggest that WCPFC adopt a target objective below MSY to compensate for biological, environmental and data uncertainties

Billfish

Although billfish are primarily caught as bycatch in commercial fisheries, they are highly sought after recreationally and represent an important economic resource to many countries where recreational fisheries are present. Because of the bycatch nature of billfish in many fisheries, a directed statistical data collection program has not been successful in allowing some species to be assessed such as sailfish, shortbill spearfish, and black marlin. The importance of billfish species to recreational catch-and-release fisheries and the economic value they generate should be justification to focus on expanding knowledge and data collection on all billfish species, especially regarding life history parameters and catch estimation. Additionally, we strongly recommend that billfish be recognized as target species in many of the WCPFC member states, as these countries benefit from active markets based on billfish products obtained from overfished stocks.

The IGFA recommends the Commission:

- Set target reference points that give stocks a greater than 50% chance to fall within the green region of the Kobe plot within 10 years where possible
- In addressing the absence of adopted limit reference points, the Commissions should not choose a higher level of acceptable risk to non-target species in favor of achieving management objectives for targeted tuna species. With striped marlin in both the North Pacific and Southwest Pacific in an overfished state, now is not the time to prioritize target species over billfish
- Work to ensure standardized data collection in longline fisheries, specifically the timing of sets and set start time
- Expand data collection and prioritize CPUE standardization for sailfish, shortbill spearfish, and black marlin in the absence of a stock assessment with the goal of assessment capability in the near future. There is also a continued need to expand data collection of billfish biological data and the IGFA recommends development of an agreed upon standardized sampling program
- Require the reporting of dead discards of all billfish species in fisheries under the WCPFC purview
- Promote and require the use of circle hooks in longline fisheries. These have been proven to reduce fishing mortality and increase live releases of billfish and other species not retained.
- Where possible, implement trade prohibition of billfish products in international trade. Similar legislation has been passed, at the request of IGFA, in the United States that now bans importation of marlin, sailfish, and spearfish in the continental United States

Striped Marlin

We are deeply concerned over the continuously diminished stock status of striped marlin in the Western and Central North Pacific Ocean. Spawning stock biomass remains significantly under MSY levels even with fishing mortality near or below F_{MSY} in recent years and recent recruitments have been lower than expected and below the long-term average since 2000. Although fishing mortality has decreased since 2000, two decades of low recruitment combined with consistent landings of immature fish have inhibited increases in spawning biomass since 2001. The stock is not recovering at current catch levels and the level of catch and effort in fisheries interaction with striped marlin must be known accurately. Life history traits used in assessment methodology such as growth parameters require additional research to improve future assessments and a significant reduction in

allowable catch is necessary after the failure to rebuild the North Pacific striped marlin stock. Limit reference points must be developed and adhered to if we hope to see any improvement in striped marlin recruitment and abundance in the North Pacific.

The Southwest Pacific striped marlin stock is likely overfished and close to experiencing overfishing. Like their counterparts in the North Pacific, the Southwest Pacific stock has no limit reference point and the stock remains overfished despite fishing mortality at or below MSY levels. Catch must be further reduced to allow the stock to rebuild, and improvements must also be made to assessment inputs to ensure accurate reporting of catch and correct life history parameters. We support SC20's recommendation that WCPFC21 request a set of recovery projections for rebuilding the Southwest Pacific striped marlin stock.

Based on growing scientific evidence, we urge the WCPFC to consider the potential for mixing of striped marlin from different genetic stocks occurring in and across the two management unit boundaries of the WCPFC, and likely across the jurisdictional boundary of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission Convention Area, when conducting stock assessments (Martinez, 2021). We also urge the WCPFC to consider preliminary data from tagged striped marlin that traveled from New Zealand across the Pacific to the waters off the Galapagos Islands. This tagging data is freely available from the [IGMR website](#). We acknowledge the increased level of uncertainty of the stock status of striped marlin managed by both the WCPFC and IATTC and urge the WCPFC to take immediate action to improve the conservation status of this species. For North Pacific striped marlin, we support the rebuilding scenarios developed by the ISC Billfish Working Group and the United States' proposed amendments to CMM 2010-01, however, we would like to see an alternative scenario included that reduces catch immediately as well as an immediate implementation of the CMR-specific overage provision that deducts the overharvested catch of striped marlin from the following year (this provision should remain in place until the stock fully rebuilds). We look forward to the proposed amendments to CMM 2010-01 being adopted in 2027, pending the results of the updated stock assessment. Lastly, the rebuilding plan should contain waypoints to measure the progress achieved during the rebuilding period. Additional conservation measures such as the mandatory use of circle hooks, modifying longline gear to remove hooks adjacent to floats or increase hook depth, requiring release of all live striped marlin or non-retention of all striped marlin, and establishing a minimum size limit should be considered.

Pacific Bluefin Tuna

The positive outcome of recent stock assessments in 2022 and 2024 for PBT is reassuring and suggests that the stock is recovering, although spawning stock biomass remains at a very low percentage of unfished levels. Because SSB is a small percentage of unfished biomass, any increases to catch limits should be treated with caution to maintain and further rebuild this ecologically and economically important stock for the long-term benefit of both commercial and recreational fisheries. The IGFA urges the Commission to consider the economic impacts of the increase in recreational fishing effort occurring in the Pacific (especially off southern California) and consider efforts to utilize the recreational fishing community to obtain crucial catch and release data on juvenile PBT. The significant economic impact attributed to increased recreational fishing for PBT in southern California can be seen in other areas if catch and release fishing has an opportunity to grow. The IGFA recommends the Commission:

- Take a precautionary approach to potential increases in catch limits by not significantly increasing catch limits and ensure rebuilding targets continue to be met in the coming years

- Continue to monitor PBT spawning stock and recruitment to ensure model assumptions are validated moving forward
- Ensure catch overages do not occur by urging nations to implement domestic catch limitation measures
- Reevaluate age at maturity parameters for PBT and explore available science to determine accurate age at maturity, similar to Atlantic bluefin tuna, as we believe that most fish caught are juveniles that have not had a chance to spawn

Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) in tropical tuna fisheries

There are concerns over the prevalence and management difficulty of FAD associated fisheries that are known to catch juvenile yellowfin and bigeye tunas. The IGFA recommends the Commission and FAD Working Group:

- Continue to closely monitor juvenile tuna fishing mortality associated with FAD fisheries
- Continue to quantify and manage the number of active and discarded FADs
- Evaluate a program to implement the suite of data collected by electronic equipped FAD devices
- Reduce the ecological impact of abandoned FADs by encouraging the transition to biodegradable materials and the recovery of buoys

IUU Fishing

- Increase efforts to reduce IUU fishing by improving VMS requirements across all managed species and increasing observer coverage on longline vessels to ensure accurate data collection and target/bycatch species identification
- Ban transshipment at sea until the Commission can verify that it is not facilitating IUU fishing. At a minimum, the working group tasked with reviewing CMM 2009-06 should institute electronic monitoring requirements for all transshipment activity and attempt to ensure declarations are received in near real-time

References

Martinez, Jackson, "Stock Composition Of Striped Marlin (*Kajikia Audax*) In The Central North Pacific Ocean Inferred By Analyses Of Genome-Wide Molecular Markers" (2021). Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects. William & Mary. Paper 1638386006. <https://doi.org/10.25773/wn5a-5r23>

The International Game Fish Association is a nonprofit organization committed to the conservation of game fish and the promotion of responsible, ethical angling practices through science, education, rule making, record keeping and recognition of outstanding accomplishments in the field of angling.

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