

EU, others: Catch plans for Bluefin tuna threaten recovery

February 27 2015, byRaf Casert



In this April 27, 2011 file photo, Atlantic bluefin tuna are corralled by fishing nets during the opening of the season for tuna fishing off the coast of Barbate, Cadiz province, southern Spain. Documents revealed on Friday, Feb. 27, 2015, show that Turkey is planning to catch up to 73 percent more Bluefin tuna than under an internationally agreed plan to limit the Atlantic Tuna catch. During an intense meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, the European Union, Japan and others nations were angry at Turkey for announcing its unilateral intention to increase their own quotas. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, File)

(AP)—The European Union, Japan and other nations hunting for the eastern Atlantic Bluefin tuna are fearful that Turkey's unilateral decision to exceed catch limits agreed last year is threatening the stock recovery and the organization regulating its conservation.

Documents seen by The Associated Press and EU comments on Friday show that during an intense meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas early this week, delegates were angry at Turkey for announcing it would catch up to 73 percent more Bluefin than under an internationally agreed plan.

"Many expressed discontent at the decision to declare an autonomous allocation and the potential of Turkey's decision to undermine the recovery of the eastern Bluefin tuna stock and the Commission as a whole," the official report of the meeting said.

Environmental groups agree. "One government going beyond international agreements could be catastrophic for the recovery of this iconic species, and in fact catastrophic for ICCAT as a relevant management organization," said Amanda Nickson, director of global tuna conservation with The Pew Charitable Trusts.

ICCAT, which has 50 contracting parties from the United States to Japan and the 28-nation EU, has led efforts to manage the global stock of the species but has been struggling to turn around the decline of the fish which is a gastronomic delight in sushi bars around the globe.

The crisis is especially dire in the Mediterranean where Bluefin tuna has been caught since Roman times. It used to be commonplace for fishermen to catch tuna weighing up to 1,100 pounds in the Mediterranean. But as prices shot up over the past 30 years, industrial high-seas vessels have been roaming the seas looking for the dwindling supply.

The decline has bottomed out but ICCAT has found it difficult to set quotas to make the industry environmentally sustainable again, and last November's decision to raise the quotas in the Mediterranean Sea shocked conservationists, who said the move puts early signs of population recovery at risk.

Next year's quota for Mediterranean Bluefin tuna has been raised by 20 percent to 15,821 metric tons, with additional 20 percent increases planned for each of the following two years.

Turkey's decision to unilaterally add to that even caused the member nations to protest.

"The EU Commission very much hopes that Turkey will reconsider this decision and that other parties abstain for taking similar decisions," said an EU official, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Turkey said this week that its "longstanding and rightful demand" for a higher quota had not been met, forcing it to take independent action.

The Turkish government said Friday negotiations on the issue were continuing but refused to comment beyond that. Even though the EU acknowledged Turkey's move was not strictly illegal under the rules, "it is a dangerous precedent," the EU official said.

During discussions that the official report called "robust" several nations during an ICCAT meeting early this week hinted they could take import measures against Turkey if it proceeded with its plan, the report of the meeting showed.

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