



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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RFA CHARGES ENVIROS WITH USING OIL TO START A FIRE

The New York Times is reporting at least one environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) is using the tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico as a calling card for fisheries reform. The Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit ENGO *heavily supported by the oil-endowed Pew Charitable Trusts, is citing the Gulf oil spill as a reason why the U.S. Government should list bluefin tuna on the endangered species list.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a request under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in May demanding the government declare bluefin an endangered species. The ESA process typically takes several years, but with scientists actively looking at how the Deepwater Horizon tragedy could affect spawning bluefin in the Gulf, it's led to increased media opportunities for groups like Center for Biological Diversity which self-purportedly use "science, law and creative media to secure a future for all species, great or small, hovering on the brink of extinction."

Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA), says using the Gulf tragedy to drum up support for anti-fishing measures may be creative, but it's also disingenuous. "An ESA listing on bluefin could be devastating for our recreational fishing community, our anglers know that and so do the ENGO's." Donofrio said as a rights-based organization RFA is wary about ESA designations due to the potential ramifications of incidental bycatch. "The ENGO's tried to get white marlin listed as endangered several years ago, which would've shut down many of the top offshore tournaments in America and could've led to more serious gear restrictions in our recreational sector," Donofrio said, explaining that the same high-speed trolling tactics employed by tuna trollers result in billfish hook-ups.

Donofrio pointed out ENGO's have already set a precedent in forcing anglers out of California's marine protected areas citing what they have called 'damaging effects of mortality associated with catch and release programs on long-lived fish populations.' "Bluefin are frequently found mixed with billfish and yellowfin on the offshore grounds, as well as striped bass in some of our inshore grounds like Cape Cod and along the Outer Banks," Donofrio said. "The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council just closed 5,000 square miles of South Atlantic waters to all bottomfishing to protect against snapper bycatch, so imagine what a pelagic ban could do."

The RFA agrees with leading scientists who believe it's virtually certain that eggs and larvae have been killed in the Gulf spill, which comes at the worst possible time of the year as spawning season for many Gulf fish stocks runs throughout the summer. But while the resource devastation will undoubtedly have some type of impact on bluefin and other stocks in the Gulf region, to use the spill as a reason to go for full-blown ESA listing is going too far, too fast, and without any scientific guidance.

"Right now there's no science to support such a measure, nor have I seen any literature that finds the oil will result in a spawning failure for bluefin or other pelagic species," said John Depersenaire, RFA's Fisheries Policy & Science Researcher. "Marlin and bluefin are longlived species that can get by with a couple years of very poor recruitment, so even if the 2010 year Gulf class is a complete failure it will not necessarily damage the overall health of the stock." Depersenaire pointed out that the current restrictions in the recreational bluefin fishery this season should already lead to the some of the lowest fishing mortality for bluefin on record, while adding "the spawning stock is already being protected."

For researchers like Depersenaire who have followed the plight of the bluefin stock for years, there is a relatively simple answer to the bluefin conservation question, but it requires an end to the rhetoric and a State Department willing to protect American interests. "The U.S. is already protecting the spawning stock, it's time all other ICCAT contracting parties do the same; and if they don't, then impose trade sanctions," Depersenaire said. ICCAT is the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic

Tunas, an inter-governmental fishery organization responsible for the conservation of tunas and tuna-like species in the Atlantic Ocean and adjacent seas.

“It’s been well-established through ICCAT and our own State Department that the European Union (EU) has been overfishing their quotas for years, even subsidizing the expansion of their national bluefin tuna fleets,” said Donofrio. “The EU keeps overfishing the stock, the Japanese keep buying up the illegal harvest, and here in the United States a well-financed environmental movement is punishing our American anglers.” The RFA has openly lobbied for international trade sanctions against the EU for most of this decade, and the group believes it’s time to pressure the Department of Commerce again for increased protection on behalf of America’s fishing communities. “If these ENGO’s really wish to protect bluefin, they should put up some of that oil money they’ve received in charitable contributions and help cure the disease as opposed to just treating the symptoms,” Donofrio said.

In 2002, the RFA filed a petition for relief under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 asking then President G.W. Bush to take action against the EU for ICCAT noncompliance. The RFA argued that EU’s disregard for quotas and management measures caused bluefin, blue marlin and white marlin stocks to seriously decline, resulting in injury to U.S. commerce. RFA’s 301 petition received tremendous support from Congress, recreational and commercial fishing organizations, and environmentalists alike, and led to high-level assurances by the Department of Commerce under the Bush administration that the EU would be held to its international obligations.

Rich Ruais, executive director of the American Bluefin Tuna Association and Blue Water Fishermen’s Association, called the 301 petition “an important and legitimate first step” towards getting the EU to begin complying with ICCAT. “Highly migratory species are truly shared resources and we cannot conserve and rebuild these stocks only on the backs of US recreational and commercial fishermen,” he said at the time. A member of the Advisory Committee to the US ICCAT delegation, Ruais recently cited amendments to the Magnuson Stevens Act and the longstanding Marine Mammal Protection Act which require the Commerce Department to restrict import of fish products from countries that do not implement “similar or comparable conservation standards” to protect fish species.

“Congress has recognized the U.S. fisherman’s world conservation leadership and demanded our fishermen not be disadvantaged in the marketplace,” said Donofrio, adding “the conservation sacrifices of the U.S. fishing community should not squandered by other nations ruthlessly exploiting this highly migratory species.” RFA believes much of the argument for securing global commitment to reigning in bluefin overharvest is the same today as in 2002, but setting the plan back in motion would require fiscal support. “What we need is for one of these ENGO’s to step up and do the right thing by helping support a 301 petition,” Depersenaire added. “With a 47% east west mixing rate, we certainly don’t want the EU or Africa exceeding bluefin landings in light of the oil spill.”

“We have a European oil company responsible for the worst environmental disaster in world history, dumping millions of barrels of oil into American waters, while European fleets are grossly overfishing their allotted quota on a stock that migrates from one side of the Atlantic to the other, so when are we going to see some real federal assistance,” asked Donofrio. “The U.S State Department needs to do what’s right and demand accountability for non-compliance of international fishing treaties through trade sanctions.” Donofrio said. “ESA listings only punish law-abiding citizens back at home, not the international scofflaws,” he added.

** Center for Biological Diversity received direct funding from Pew Charitable Trusts in 1998, and according to its 2007 and 2008 annual reports they claim support from the Tides Foundation, a recipient of Pew Charitable Trusts Funding according to the Center for Media & Democracy. The Center For Consumer Freedom reports that Pew has donated over \$40 million to Tides Foundation and Tides Center since 1996. In their 2009 annual report, Center for Biological Diversity lists the BP Foundation as a provider of Matching Gifts.*