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BLUEFIN TUNA

Dear Sir

We need your help to review the recreational allowance for Pacific bluefin tuna and to make a viable and sustainable world-class game fishery for this species in New Zealand waters.

The Marine Transport Association and the Ministry of Fisheries are proposing that charterboat operators and skippers report their catches, both landed and released, of bluefin tuna during the 2007 and 2008 West Coast fishing seasons. The proposal is that each charter vessel operator reports the number of fish and individual weights, including those released, after each fishing trip.

This project is very important for bluefin tuna, particularly Pacific bluefin. With the development of a new fishery off the West Coast South Island, the current recreational allowance for the stock may be inadequate. There is a need for better information to consider whether to review it.

MFish, the NZ Marine Research Foundation and Stanford University in the United States are committed to satellite tagging Pacific bluefin tuna caught by charter vessels fishing the West Coast. Successful tagging and data retrieval was carried out last season, with more planned this year.

Reporting and satellite tagging reinforces the charterboat industry, gamefisher and government interest in making a long-term management commitment to bluefin tuna.

Gamefish catch records are important for documenting New Zealand's ability to monitor its bluefin fishery prior to more active international management controls. These assist in achieving an objective to develop a viable and sustainable world-class game fishery for bluefin tuna in New Zealand waters.

Pacific bluefin tuna (*Thunnus orientalis*) and southern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*) occur throughout the Pacific. Under the Law of the Sea, regional fisheries management organisations have the task of ensuring the conservation and management of tuna and other highly migratory species throughout the areas of jurisdiction.

RFMOs have set national catch limits for southern bluefin

tuna, and have requested member states such as New Zealand to exercise reasonable restraint of their fishing fleets when fishing Pacific bluefin tuna.

The New Zealand approach to implementing national catch limits or achieving reasonable restraint was to introduce both stocks into the quota management system in 2004. At that time the following catch limits and allowances were set for each species of bluefin tuna in tonnes:

	PACIFIC BLUEFIN	SOUTHERN BLUEFIN
Total Allowable Catch	120	420
Recreational allowance	1	4
Customary allowance	0.5	1
Fishing related incidental mortality	2.5	2
Total Allowable Commercial Catch	116	413

However, since that time, catches are likely to have increased substantially. The potential for an off-season gamefishery of world class status has not been lost on the New Zealand charterboat fleet. Recreational magazines articles and television programmes depict a rapidly developing charter-based fishery off the West Coast of the South Island (based on Greymouth and Westport) since 2005.

Anecdotal information suggests that up to 100 bluefin were taken by gamefishers and spearfishers on the West Coast during the winter of 2006. However, it is unknown how many of each species were landed or how many were released alive.

International obligations are likely to require more active management of the Pacific bluefin in the future. National catch limits have already been imposed on the southern bluefin fishery. New Zealand will be required to monitor these fisheries during the coming seasons. The New Zealand gamefishery is based on trophy-sized fish, so there is considerable incentive in ensuring these fisheries are well managed.

The Marine Transport Association and MFish are proposing a web-based system for monitoring gamefish catches of bluefin tuna. Discussions held with the South Island Recreational Forum during May and at the Recreational Fishing conference during July recommended that any system be kept as simple as possible. Concern was expressed about using data for purposes other than for counting fish. To address these concerns this proposal is designed to record only the catch and release of fish. No effort data will be collected.

The proposal simply requests that charter vessel operators report the number of fish and individual weights (including estimated weights of those fish released) after each fishing trip to the MFish website or fax number. Summary results will be displayed on the MFish website. See www.fish.govt.nz

MFish will outline in greater detail how catches should be reported in a letter to charter boat operators. Further background will be provided in the next issue of *Professional Skipper* magazine.

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