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News Release

Strickland Announces Continued United States Support for International Proposal to Protect Bluefin Tuna

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The United States will continue its support for a proposal to ban all international commercial trade of Atlantic bluefin tuna at this month's meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora (CITES) in Doha, Qatar, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Tom Strickland announced today.

Strickland, who will head the U.S. delegation to the 15th Conference of Parties (CoP15) of the 175-nation treaty, initially announced support for the proposal last October, but left open the possibility that the United States could modify its position if the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) adopted significantly strengthened management and compliance measures during its November 2009 meeting.

"Under the leadership of NOAA, the United States entered the meeting seeking the strongest possible agreement for the conservation of eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna. We recognize that the parties to ICCAT took some unprecedented steps," said Strickland. "However, in light of the serious compliance problems that have plagued the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean fishery and the fact that the 2010 quota level adopted by ICCAT is not as low as we believe is needed, the United States continues to have serious concerns about the long-term viability of either the fish or the fishery."

The Atlantic bluefin tuna is highly prized, especially for sashimi, and a single fish can be sold for tens of thousands of dollars. The Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock is threatened by overharvesting, which includes illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing.

Current population information for the species shows it meets the biological criteria for listing in Appendix I. In the Atlantic Ocean, bluefin tuna are managed as two separate stocks, an Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, and a Western. The Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock of the Atlantic bluefin tuna has declined steeply during the last 10 years. Based on estimated catches, scientists estimated the spawning stock biomass in 2007 to be 78,724 metric tons. This contrasts with the biomass peak of 1955, at 305,136 metric tons. The decline over the 50-year historical period ranging from 1955 to 2007 is estimated at 74.2 percent, the bulk of which (60.9 percent) took place during the last 10 years.

The Western Atlantic spawning stock has declined by 82.4 percent from 49,482 metric tons in 1970 to 8,693 metric tons in 2007. During the past decade, the Western stock has stabilized at a very low population level. Many experts correlate this stabilization to adoption of rigorous science-based catch quotas and other management measures together with effective monitoring and enforcement. Such measures ensured strict compliance with ICCAT's ruled by the U.S. fleet.

Strickland noted that the parties to ICCAT took positive steps at the November meeting. These steps included a commitment to set future catch levels in line with scientific advice, to shorten the fishing season, reduce fishing capacity, and close the fishery if the stocks continue to decline. However, in light of the serious compliance problems that have plagued the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean fishery and the fact that the 2010 quota level adopted by ICCAT is not as low as needed, the United States will support the proposal to list Atlantic bluefin tuna in Appendix I at CoP15 and will work actively with Monaco and other CITES and ICCAT Parties in order to achieve positive results for bluefin tuna at CoP15 and at the 2010 ICCAT annual meeting.

If the bluefin tuna is listed under Appendix I, commercial fishermen in the United States could continue to sell western Atlantic bluefin tuna caught in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) domestically. Fishing in the EEZ is tightly regulated in the United States to ensure that it meets the ICCAT science-based quota. The United States is both a consumer and a net importer of Atlantic bluefin tuna. Strickland indicated that the United States will explore measures to assist fishermen if international trade is restricted.

"We understand the frustration of our U.S. fishermen who have followed the scientific recommendations and regulatory provisions of ICCAT for many years while their counterparts in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean have often overfished and engaged in ineffective management," Strickland said. "The U.S. government is committed to working with our many international partners to continue to rebuild Atlantic bluefin tuna and ensure sustained conservation and management of the species into the future."

A CITES-regulated species may be included in one of three appendices to the convention:

- Appendix I includes species for which it is determined that any commercial trade is detrimental to the survival of the species. Therefore, no commercial trade is allowed in Appendix-I species. Non-commercial trade in such species is allowed if it does not jeopardize the species' survival in the wild. Permits are required for the exportation and importation of Appendix-I species.
- Appendix II includes species for which it has been determined that commercial trade may be detrimental to the survival of the species if that trade is not strictly controlled. Trade in these species is regulated through the use of export permits.
- Appendix III includes species listed by a range country that requires the assistance of other parties to ensure that exports of their native species are legal. Permits are used to control and monitor trade in native species. Any CITES party may place a native species in Appendix III.

Any listing of a species in either Appendix I or II requires approval by two-thirds of the CITES party countries that vote on the proposal.

The Conference of the Parties will be held March 13-25, 2010, in Doha, Qatar.