

BirdLife International Statement: SC18 Agenda Item 5.3: SEABIRD BYCATCH MITIGATION METHODS

18th session of the WCPFC Scientific Committee – August 2022, online.

BirdLife International thanks the Secretariat and Members for their continued work during ongoing disruptions due to Covid-19. We are pleased to see seabird bycatch included in the agenda for the Scientific Committee's consideration this year. We emphasize that it is critically important for the WCPFC (Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission) to address the ongoing bycatch of threatened and endangered seabird species in the WCPO (Western and Central Pacific Ocean) as a duty under the Convention.

BirdLife International are highly supportive of ongoing efforts to identify improved seabird bycatch mitigation measures in WCPFC fisheries. However, we note that some Members are not meeting the required seabird bycatch mitigation specifications under CMM 2018-03 in its current form. Further, the recommendations in CMM 2018-03 do not yet meet ACAP (Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels) Best Practice Standards, yet Members still fail to meet them year on year (Table 1), instead proposing more trials of an alternative design or claiming more data is needed to verify the effectiveness of the measures listed in CMM 2018-03.

Therefore, BirdLife International are genuinely concerned by Agenda Item 5.3 that includes the proposal, as recommended by the SC17, that Members further investigate 1) streamer-less bird scaring lines, and 2) blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge as acceptable seabird bycatch mitigation measures. That is:

1. SC17 Summary Report, Paragraph 393. *“SC17 recommends that Commission CCMs with small-scale longline vessels (< 24m) operating north of 23° North provide the SC (Scientific Committee) with information, such as the results of scientific research or EM-based commercial vessel survey, as well as the specific mitigation measures used by those vessels and the associated seabird interaction rates for each mitigation measure, if available, including streamer-less tori lines, and that SC18 review such information, to make findings and recommendations with respect to the effectiveness of the streamer-less tori line designs to inform the Commission's review under CMM 2015-03 (and its successor measures).”*
2. SC17 Summary Report, Paragraph 394. *“SC17 encourages further experimental investigation of 'strategic' offal discharge and blue-dyed bait to determine the relative efficacy of these seabird bycatch mitigation methods”*

Evidence submitted to the SC18 - [SC18-EB-IP-14](#) demonstrates the above proposals are ineffective to reduce seabird bycatch. In this work, the researchers conducted experimental trials, in collaboration with fishing crew, in the Hawaiian DLL fishery (in the North Pacific) using three bird scaring line (BSL) designs, including a streamer-less design, and found:

- The streamer-less design was **least** favoured by captains and crew because they believed the design would be less effective at reducing seabird interactions than designs with streamers.

- **Neither blue-dyed bait nor offal discharges were effective at reducing albatross interactions.** In fact, offal discharge increased the probability of albatross interactions.

This research was also submitted to the SC17 as document [SC17-EB-IP-05](#), the results have not changed since. While there have been trials conducted by Japan that indicate streamer-less BSL may have some effect, the body of evidence demonstrating BSL **with streamers** are actually effective at reducing seabird interactions is considerable and thus should be prioritised. BirdLife International also directs WCPFC Members to additional [peer-reviewed](#) research and [New Zealand](#) and [Australian](#) government trials of BSL that demonstrate assorted designs for different vessel configurations.

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

We remind WCPFC Members that the ACAP Seabird Bycatch Working Group continually reviews the latest trials of gear appropriate seabird bycatch mitigation tools and provides scientifically robust advice to Regional Fisheries Management Organisations globally, including the WCPFC. The latest ACAP advice states “*Properly designed and deployed BSLs deter birds from sinking baits, dramatically reducing seabird attacks and related mortalities. **Brightly coloured streamers hanging from the aerial extent of the line scare birds from flying to and under the line, preventing them from reaching the baited hooks.** ...*” (emphasis added)

ACAP acknowledge, as do BirdLife, that there are operational differences in pelagic longline fisheries due to vessel size and gear type. Thus, ACAP specifies the technical requirements for two vessel-size categories: >35 meters and <35 meters in length. However, no BSL specifications recommend streamer-less options. [Full advice on Bird Scaring Lines.](#)

In regard to offal and discard discharge management, ACAP best practice advice states: “*Offal attracts birds to vessels and where practical **should be eliminated**, or restricted to periods when not setting or hauling. Strategic discharge of offal during line setting (dumping of offal to the side of the vessel to attract them away from baited hooks) **can actually increase interactions between seabirds and baited hooks and should be discouraged.***”

Regarding blue-dyed bait, ACAP best practice advice states “**No experimental evidence of effectiveness in pelagic longline fisheries.**” This advice is further supported by the very evidence submitted to SC18 – in paper [SC18-EB-IP-14](#).

In practice, the [USA, in its 2021 annual report](#) to the SC reported the bycatch of 109 black-footed, 46 Laysan albatrosses, a sooty shearwater and 3 unidentified shearwaters by vessels operating north of 23° North. A further 23 black-footed and 2 Laysan albatrosses were caught by vessels operating 23°N-30°S. Compliance with the existing mitigation measures, that is blue-dyed bait, offal management, line weighting and night setting was reported as 100% compliant. This direct evidence from the USA demonstrates that these options for mitigation are not effective at reducing seabird bycatch.

If the Scientific Committee are in fact serious about following scientific advice, then CMM 2018-03 should be reviewed and amended to meet ACAP Best Practice measures. This is particularly true for measures north of 23°N as the [current mitigation measures required](#) are misaligned with current knowledge on best practice for both vessels >24m and <24m in length. Albatross bycatch north of 23°N is of serious concern as Members continue to report unacceptable rates of observed seabird bycatch when using blue-dyed bait and offal management (e.g., [black-footed and Laysan albatrosses](#)).

If this proposal to trial this streamer-less BSL design proceeds, first Members should, at the minimum deploy BSL with the specifications outlined in CMM 2018-03 and report the bycatch rates to the Commission (as agreed to by all Members when the CMM was adopted) prior to embarking on trials of other BSL designs. If anything, any amendment of mitigation measures in the North Pacific should match the requirements of vessels south of 30°S, which when implemented properly are effective at reducing seabird bycatch. This approach would also standardise mitigation methods across the WCPO. These measures are:

- a) at least two of these three measures:
 - i. Weighted branch lines;
 - ii. Night setting;
 - iii. tori lines (BSL); or
- b) hook-shielding devices.

KEY POINTS

- The north Pacific is a high-risk area for three threatened albatross species to interact with fishing vessels.
- There is robust scientific evidence that blue-dyed bait, and strategic offal discharge is ineffective in reducing seabird bycatch in longline fisheries. ACAP **do not** advise the use of these measures.
- There is sufficient and robust evidence demonstrating BSL with streamers are effective.
- CMM 2018-03 should be amended to meet ACAP Best Practice measures for all areas of the WCPFC.
- We encourage the continued experimentation of methods to reduce seabird bycatch in WCPFC fisheries so that the methods are fit-for-purpose, while simultaneously meeting the current obligations of CMM 2018-03.

SUMMARY

BirdLife International asks the Scientific Committee to ensure Members are **first** implementing the agreed mitigation measures to specification set out in CMM2018-03 and reporting seabird bycatch data, as per WCPFC requirements, before pursuing trials of methods that have not been endorsed by ACAP.

Finally, BirdLife International advises the Scientific Committee of a research project being undertaken by colleagues to assess the risk of bycatch for North Pacific albatross species in WCPFC fisheries. The results of this work will be submitted to SC19. If Members have any questions about this work please contact Dr Tommy Cay at tclay@edf.org or through BirdLife – Stephanie.borrelle@BirdLife.org.

Table 1: Bycatch mitigation compliance in 2018 -2021 north of 23°N.

Country	Year	Fishing effort (hooks)	Observed effort (% total hooks) north of 23° N	North of 23°N (% observed effort 2/3 mitigation measures)	Total birds caught	Birds/1000 hooks
China	2018	779,000	15.15	Unknown	6	0.058
	2019	144,000	8.33	Unknown	0	0
	2020	745,000	0	100	0	0
	2021	959,000	0	100	0	0
Chinese Taipei	2018	26,173,362	6.4	87.6	14	5
	2019	31,792,234	2.6	87.5	21	2
	2020	28,842,954	4.8	97	46	42
	2021	16,723,505	1.3	98.7	10	9
Japan*	2018	62,523,768	2.05	Unknown	116	0.125
	2019	60,925,599	3.2	74.8	520	0.246
	2020	70,905,265	0.05	5.4	28	0.00
	2021	49,839,638	0	Unknown	0	0.00
USA	2018	54,482,420	20.4 (including 23° N – 30° S)	100	249	0.02
	2019	63,349,796	21.03 (including 23° N – 30° S)	100	226	0.02
	2020	58,763,329	15.87 (including 23° N – 30° S)	100	188	0.02
	2021	64,985,095	19.12 (including 23° N – 30° S)	100	184	0.01

*combined for <24GRT and >24GRT