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Recommendations to the 23rd Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

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Submitted by The International Game Fish Association

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The International Game Fish Association (IGFA) was established in 1939 at the American Museum of Natural History to advance our knowledge of global fish species through recreational angling. Today, the IGFA stands as one of the most widely recognized authorities on game fish and angling-related matters in the world. Through conservation, research, rule-making to promote sustainable angling, and recognition of angling accomplishments, the IGFA represents the voice of the global recreational fishing community, including many who target the highly migratory species managed by the WCPFC, especially marlin, sailfish, and spearfish (i.e., billfish), which are primarily caught and released.

The IGFA continues to have great concern about how highly migratory species are being managed on a global level. The lack of data and accurate reporting of billfish catch leading to highly uncertain stock estimates is of particular concern. As an organization that is committed to the conservation of game fishes and obtaining more and improved data on them, the IGFA has deployed over 700 pop-up satellite archival tags on billfish around the world in the last fifteen years, many of which have been in waters under this organization's purview. The information gained from the IGFA Great Marlin Race (IGMR) is open access and available to your scientific committee and others who wish to utilize it for research and management purposes.

Lastly, we are pleased to make available the themed issue of *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, published in 2026, that is based on billfish research presented at the 7th International Billfish Symposium. We strongly urge the WCPFC and Scientific Committee to consider this critical research in future management and regulatory decisions.

The following are the IGFA's recommendations to the 23rd Session of the WCPFC:

Billfish

Although billfish are primarily caught as bycatch in commercial fisheries, they are highly sought after recreationally and represent an important economic resource to many countries where recreational fisheries are present. Because of the bycatch nature of billfish in many fisheries, a directed statistical data collection program has not been successful in allowing some species to be assessed such as sailfish, black marlin, and shortbill spearfish. The importance of billfish species to recreational catch-and-release fisheries and the economic value they generate should be justification to focus on expanding knowledge and data collection on all billfish species, especially regarding life history parameters and catch estimation. Additionally, we strongly recommend that billfish be recognized as target species by the WCPFC, given the fact that many of the WCPFC member states benefit from active markets based on billfish products obtained from overfished or data limited stocks.

The IGFA recommends the Commission:

- Set target reference points that give stocks a greater than 50% chance to fall within the green region of the Kobe plot within 10 years where possible
- In addressing the absence of adopted limit reference points, the Commission should not choose a higher level of acceptable risk to non-target species in favor of achieving management objectives for targeted tuna species. With striped marlin in both the North Pacific and Southwest Pacific in

an overfished and likely overfished state, respectively, now is not the time to prioritize target species over billfish
- Work to ensure standardized data collection in longline fisheries, specifically the timing of sets and set start time
- Expand data collection and prioritize CPUE standardization for sailfish, shortbill spearfish, and black marlin in the absence of a stock assessment with the goal of assessment capability in the near future. There is also a continuing need to expand data collection of billfish biological data and we look forward to the continued development and implementation of the ISC International Billfish Biological Sampling (IBBS) Program
- Require the reporting of dead discards of all billfish species in fisheries under the WCPFC purview
- Promote and require the use of circle hooks in longline fisheries, which have been proven to reduce fishing mortality and increase live releases of billfish and other species not retained
- Where possible, implement trade prohibition of billfish products in international trade. Similar legislation has been passed, at the request of the IGFA, in the United States that now bans importation of marlin, sailfish, and spearfish in the continental United States

Given the above recommendations, we would like to acknowledge the recent progress made at the 104th Meeting of the IATTC with the Resolution on a Workplan for Billfish in the IATTC (Resolution C-26-09) that includes an agreement to convene a billfish workshop in 2027 to develop a workplan for data collection and stock assessments. The progress made through this Resolution in the Eastern Pacific will be highly relevant to the WCPFC and we strongly recommend continued communication and collaboration between the Pacific RFMOs, noting the continued progress of WCPFC Project 130 (Joint Bycatch Assessment Workshop for Billfish and Sharks).

Striped Marlin

We are deeply concerned over the continuously diminished stock status of striped marlin in the Western and Central North Pacific Ocean. Spawning stock biomass remains significantly under MSY levels even with fishing mortality near or below F_{MSY} in recent years and recent recruitments have been lower than expected and below the long-term average since 2000. Although fishing mortality has decreased since 2000, two decades of low recruitment combined with consistent landings of immature fish have inhibited increases in spawning biomass since 2001. The stock is not recovering at current catch levels and the level of catch and effort in fisheries interacting with striped marlin must be known accurately. Life history traits used in assessment methodology such as growth parameters require additional research to improve future assessments and a significant reduction in allowable catch is necessary after the failure to rebuild the North Pacific striped marlin stock. Limit reference points must be developed and adhered to if we hope to see any improvement in striped marlin recruitment and abundance in the North Pacific. We strongly urge the consideration of additional conservation measures such as the mandatory use of circle hooks, modifying longline gear to remove hooks adjacent to floats or increase hook depth, requiring release of all live striped marlin or non-retention of all striped marlin, and establishing a minimum size limit for retention.

The Southwest Pacific striped marlin stock is likely overfished and unlikely to be undergoing overfishing (per the 2025 stock assessment). Like their counterparts in the North Pacific, the Southwest Pacific stock has no limit reference points and the stock remains overfished despite fishing mortality at or below MSY levels. Catch must be further reduced to allow the stock to rebuild and improvements must be made to assessment inputs to ensure accurate reporting and estimates of catch, population dynamics, and life history parameters (e.g., growth, maturity, and natural mortality). We look forward to ongoing and future efforts to revise and improve confidence in the assessments of both management stocks of striped marlin.

Based on growing scientific evidence, we urge the WCPFC to consider the occurrence of mixing of striped marlin from different genetic stocks occurring in and across the two management unit boundaries of the WCPFC, and across the jurisdictional boundary of the IATTC Convention Area, when establishing stock boundaries and conducting assessments (Martinez et al. 2025). Specifically, a high proportion (over half) of striped marlin sampled from the Hawaii-based pelagic longline fishery were assigned into an Oceania stock that comprised samples from New Zealand, eastern Australia, and western Australia, characterizing the central North Pacific as a crucial mixing ground for multiple stocks of mostly juvenile striped marlin across a 14-month period. We also urge the WCPFC to consider recent data from a tagged striped marlin that traveled from New Zealand toward the northeast to south of the equator in the central Pacific, as well as another that traveled from New Zealand to just off the Galapagos Islands. This tagging data is freely available by request to the IGFA. We acknowledge the increased level of uncertainty of the stock status of striped marlin managed by both the WCPFC and IATTC and strongly urge the WCPFC to ensure CCMs adhere to relevant catch and reporting requirements per CMM 2024-06 for striped marlin.

Pacific Bluefin Tuna

We commend the positive adoption of the PBT harvest strategy at the IATTC Annual Meeting and urge similar action at the 23rd Regular Session of the WCPFC. We recommend the Commission consider the economic impacts of the increase in recreational fishing effort occurring in the Pacific (especially off southern California) and consider efforts to utilize the recreational fishing community to obtain crucial catch and release data on juvenile PBT. The significant economic impact attributed to increased recreational fishing for PBT in southern California can be seen in other areas if catch and release fishing has an opportunity to grow.

The IGFA recommends the Commission:

- Take a precautionary approach to potential increases in catch limits by not significantly increasing catch limits and ensure rebuilding targets continue to be met in the coming years
- Continue to monitor PBT spawning stock and recruitment to ensure model assumptions are validated moving forward
- Ensure catch overages do not occur by urging nations to implement domestic catch limitation measures
- Reevaluate age at maturity parameters for PBT and explore available science to determine accurate age at maturity, similar to Atlantic bluefin tuna, as we believe that most fish caught are juveniles that have not had a chance to spawn

Recreational Fishing

Recreational angling is a continuously growing and economically vibrant entity in many countries and we urge the WCPFC to recognize both its relevance and that it may necessitate alternate management objectives than those used in commercial fisheries. The IGFA kindly offers its consultation to WCPFC on recreational fisheries issues and recommends the following to the Commission:

- Current WCPFC quota allocation and reallocation policies do not take into consideration the economic value of catch and release recreational fisheries. WCPFC contracting parties should be free to utilize quota as they desire, even if it is not fully harvested, without penalty of quota redistribution
- Managing fisheries on the basis of MSY is an excessively risk-prone approach. As such, we suggest that WCPFC adopt a target objective below MSY to compensate for biological, environmental and data uncertainties

References

Martinez, J. L., Graves, J. E., & McDowell, J. R. (2025). SNP genotyping reveals a mixed-stock fishery for striped marlin, *Kajikia audax*, in the central North Pacific Ocean. *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, *82*(9). https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsaf156