



# International Game Fish Association

300 Gulf Stream Way, Dania Beach, Florida, 33004 U.S.A.

Phone: (954) 927-2628 • Fax: (954) 924-4299

## **Recommendations to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission**

The International Game Fish Association (IGFA) is a non-profit organization that represents recreational anglers throughout the world. Established in 1939, the IGFA has active members in 127 countries and is the governing body for international recreational fishing, providing rules for ethical angling practices and game fish conservation. Many of the IGFA's members target the highly migratory species managed by the IATTC, especially marlin, sailfish and spearfish (i.e. billfish) which are primarily caught and released.

The IGFA has great concern about how highly migratory species are being managed on a global level for recreational anglers. The lack of data and accurate reporting on billfish catch is of particular concern, as are the poor assessment outcomes for several billfish species under IATTC management purview. As an organization that is committed to the conservation of game fishes, the IGFA, in partnership with Stanford University, has deployed over 665 pop-up satellite archival tags in marlin around the world since 2011, many of which have been in waters under this organization's purview. The information gained from this tagging program, known as The IGFA Great Marlin Race, is freely available to your scientific committee.

Additionally, the IGFA and Wild Oceans held the 7<sup>th</sup> International Billfish Symposium in October 2024 to advance our scientific understanding of billfish. The Symposium garnered over 100 participants from nine countries, demonstrating the devotion of that our community of anglers, scientists, and managers have for these incredible species. We look forward to making the research that was presented available to the greater community by facilitating the publication of articles in a themed issue of *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, and we strongly urge the IATTC and Science Committee to consider this critical research in future management and regulatory decisions.

The following are the IGFA's recommendations for the 103<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission:

### **Billfish**

#### **Sailfish**

The health of the sailfish stock in the EPO remains unknown. The level of sailfish catch is unreliable and the likelihood of accurately determining historical catch is low. Reported annual average catch has decreased in the 2020-2022 estimate (543t) compared to 1993-2007 (2,057t); however, these catches may not fully represent the future expectation of catch or could be a result of decreased availability of sailfish to fisheries for a variety of natural and anthropogenic

reasons. As sailfish are predominantly caught as bycatch, this decreased catch level is concerning given that abundance is thought to be constant or increasing since 2009. The IGFA recommends action be taken to better estimate historical catch or determine an alternative approach to better assess the stock. This should begin with the quantification of current effort off Central America from all fleets including local artisanal longlines where total catch is made up of a disproportionate number of sailfish. Once there is an accurate understanding of fishing mortality for each year, it becomes more likely that back calculating catch will reveal trends associated with historical sailfish catch and effort. The IGFA would like to see more being done to properly assess this species that generates tremendous economic benefits through recreational fishing tourism across Central America.

### **Blue Marlin**

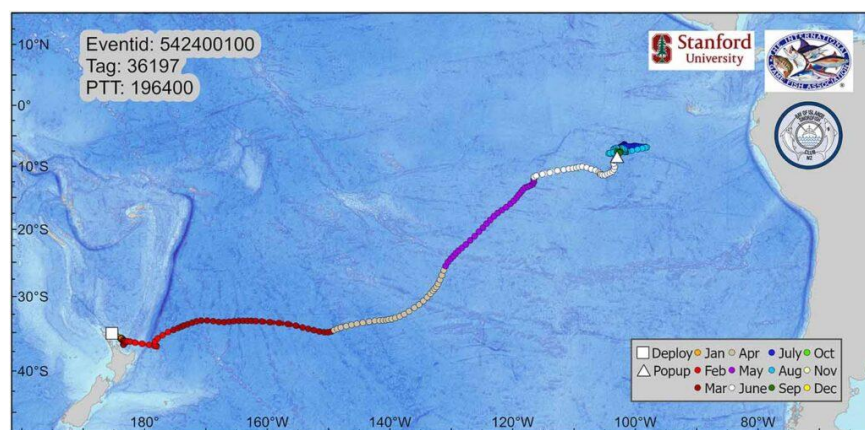
The most recent assessment (2021) for blue marlin indicated that the stock is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The 2020-2022 catch estimate of 2,088t is nearly half the average annual catch from 2017-2019. Assuming a healthy stock based on the 2021 assessment, the IGFA would be interested to learn why catch has declined so significantly. As such, the IGFA urges the commission to maintain or reduce the harvest of blue marlin so that the stock maintains a healthy condition. The prevalence of anchored FAD fishing off Central America has greatly increased recreational blue marlin catch rates over the last decade and more work should be done to explore the impact of these FADs on the blue marlin population. Research conducted by the University of Miami found blue marlin migrations may be impacted by the availability of prey at FADs off Costa Rica, potentially having a larger impact on the population dynamics of the species locally.

### **Striped Marlin**

Although the previous assessment, conducted 17 years ago, indicated the EPO striped marlin stock to be healthy, we are concerned with the overall condition of the species. First, we are concerned by the lack of an updated assessment and the unknown levels of local catch in the EPO, especially given the uncertainty in the recent WCNPO striped marlin assessment relative to catch accuracy and recruitment. Given this uncertainty in the North Pacific striped marlin assessment status and declining female SSB without increasing mortality, it is clear something is happening with this species stock determination, either in the assessment process or naturally, that is keeping SSB low regardless of fishing mortality levels. A precautionary approach is critical with this species, thus the IGFA recommends catch not be increased and efforts be made to better understand stock structure, spawning behavior, and age/growth as well as current and historical catch information from the EPO. The IGFA, in collaboration with CICIMAR-IPN in Mexico, is currently working on a new estimate of striped marlin size at first maturity from fish caught out of Cabo that we expect to publish in late 2025. We hope this estimate can be used to better inform assessment efforts and potentially establish a minimum size for retention by the recreational fleet in Mexican waters.

Second, we strongly urge the IATTC to consider recent data collected by the IGFA Great Marlin Race that demonstrate stock mixing between the EPO and North Pacific. Striped marlin tagged off Baja California Sur, especially those tagged during the Magdalena Bay aggregation in late fall/early winter, have shown movements southward and westward toward Hawaii and beyond. Some individuals also indicated a return from Hawaii toward the EPO, potentially revealing an

annual migration among certain individuals. Additional tagging efforts have revealed a seldom-reported trans-Pacific movement, with a satellite tagged fish traveling over 4,700nm from New Zealand to just west of the Galapagos Islands in 244 days (map below). A recent population genetic study also revealed extensive stock mixing of striped marlin in the central North Pacific, assigning over half of the striped marlin sampled from the Hawaii-based pelagic longline fishery into an OCEANIA stock that comprised samples from New Zealand, eastern Australia, and western Australia. A high proportion of striped marlin sampled from east of the Main Hawaiian Islands and 150°W, in the management jurisdiction of the IATTC, were also found to belong to the OCEANIA stock (Martinez et al. 2025). Given the elevated level of stock mixing occurring across management stock boundaries and RFMO jurisdictions throughout the Pacific, it is imperative that the IATTC and WCPFC consider joint management efforts for this species.



## Black Marlin

The IGFA recommends more effort to be directed at exploring the status of black marlin in the EPO. The lack of assessment of black marlin in any ocean is problematic as the species is important to recreational fishing and catches are rapidly changing both spatially and temporally. Previously identified “hotspots” for the species are no longer relevant and there has been some indication from tagging studies that there may be some level of connectivity between Oceania and the EPO.

## General Comments on Billfish

- The IGFA further recommends implementing a prohibition on billfish entering into international trade. Similar legislation has been passed, at the request of IGFA, in the United States that now bans importation of marlin, sailfish, and spearfish into the continental United States.
- The IGFA recommends all countries be required to report dead discards and use circle hooks in their longline fisheries.

## **Tunas**

### **Pacific Bluefin Tuna**

While we were pleased to see the results of the 2024 benchmark stock assessment for Pacific bluefin tuna (PBT) in the NPO, we strongly recommend a precautionary approach to any increases in catch limits for this species. We urge the IATTC to maintain the positive gains in PBT biomass, focusing on stock safety, and recommend the adoption of Harvest Control Rule (HCR) 11. This HCR sets a target biomass at 40% and a West:East allocation of 70:30, providing a buffer against low recruitment regimes, as well as a buffer against scientific uncertainty surrounding estimates of recruitment and natural mortality, and the potential effects of changing ocean conditions, increased quota of juvenile/immature fish in the western Pacific, and shifting forage availability. We also recommend that the IATTC continue to monitor PBT spawning stock and recruitment to ensure model assumptions are validated moving forward, in addition to supporting ongoing efforts to quantify unreported catch and discards of PBT.

Additionally, the IGFA also urges the IATTC to 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. It is our view that this significant economic impact attributed to increased recreational fishing for PBT in southern California can be seen in other areas if recreational fishing has an opportunity to grow.

### **Tropical Tunas**

The IGFA recommends action on bigeye tuna be taken in the form of a harvest strategy and MSE to be adopted in 2026. We support harvest strategies aimed at maintaining increased abundance levels to support robust US commercial and recreational fisheries. Consistent with IATTC staff's scientific advice, the IGFA supports the 10-day reduction in the purse seine closure (Resolution C-21-04) from 72 to 62 days for one year. We do not support removing the corralito closure.

### **General Comments**

- Recreational angling is an established and important economic entity in developed countries and a growing one in many developing nations. As such, the IGFA wishes that IATTC recognize both its relevance and that it may necessitate alternate management objectives than those used in commercial fisheries. As it is the world's peak body regarding recreational fisheries, the IGFA kindly offers its consultation to IATTC on recreational fisheries issues.

### **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 JMS*. (In Press)

*The International Game Fish Association is a nonprofit organization committed to the conservation of game fish and the promotion of responsible, ethical angling practices through science, education, rule making, record keeping and recognition of outstanding accomplishments in the field of angling.*

Email: [HQ@igfa.org](mailto:HQ@igfa.org) • Website: [www.igfa.org](http://www.igfa.org)