

Concept Note

Proposal for the Establishment of a Billfish Working Group within the IATTC

Submitted by Panama

Background

The Antigua Convention covers the conservation and sustainable use of billfish species in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO), as these are tuna-like, highly migratory, and transboundary species. Their assessment and management require data from multiple fisheries — including industrial longline and purse seine fleets, artisanal fisheries, recreational fisheries — as well as fishery-independent information.

Historically, the IATTC has focused its attention on the five main tuna species (yellowfin, skipjack, bigeye, Pacific bluefin, and albacore), which has limited the institutional capacity to analyze other incidentally caught species. Billfish, dolphinfish, and sharks face structural constraints regarding data availability, research funding, and regional coordination. This issue is particularly acute in coastal, artisanal, and recreational fisheries, where stock assessment models remain especially limited.

The Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), in document SAC-12-09, noted that research on these species “has been severely constrained” due to the lack of data (IATTC, 2021). This situation has persisted since at least 2013 (IATTC, 2014) and is reflected in recent assessments reporting limited information on recreational billfish catches (IATTC, 2020; IATTC, 2025).

Consistent with the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries and the Antigua Convention, strengthening knowledge on these species constitutes an institutional imperative. The experience of the technical workshop on swordfish (SWO-01) demonstrated that scientific progress requires greater data integration and coordination among stakeholders (IATTC, 2020). In this context, the creation of a Billfish Working Group represents a necessary and timely response.

Justification

This proposal responds to three converging factors:

Data gaps: Most of the information currently used in stock assessments originates from industrial fleets; artisanal and recreational fisheries — where a substantial portion of billfish catches occur — remain underrepresented (IATTC, 2021; IATTC, 2016). The SWO-01 workshop demonstrated that scientific progress depends on integrating multiple data sources and enhancing coordination among countries and disciplines.

Institutional coordination: The ISC *Billfish Working Group* in the North Pacific has demonstrated the effectiveness of interinstitutional scientific collaboration through the integration of data from multiple fleets, jurisdictions, and RFMOs. The IATTC already collaborates actively with the ISC on northern trans-Pacific billfish stocks. However, important billfish fisheries and stocks in the EPO, particularly in the southern region and in artisanal and recreational fisheries, remain outside the primary scope of this process and

continue to face significant data limitations. In this context, an IATTC Billfish Working Group could complement existing ISC collaborations by strengthening regional coordination, improving data collection and integration across fisheries, and supporting a more systematic scientific framework for billfish assessments throughout the EPO.

Opportunity for private sector engagement: Initiatives such as the Central American Sportfishing Alliance have expressed their willingness to support monitoring efforts, share data, and participate in collaborative management processes. Such participation requires formal institutional structures capable of ensuring transparency, traceability, and appropriate use of information.

Objective

To establish a Billfish Working Group within the framework of the IATTC in order to strengthen the scientific basis and regional governance of these species in the EPO through: (i) improving the availability, quality, and integration of data from multiple fisheries; (ii) strengthening scientific coordination among CPCs; (iii) developing robust stock assessments to support evidence-based decision-making; and (iv) promoting coordination between public and private stakeholders under a transparent governance framework aligned with the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries and the Antigua Convention.

Scope and Strategic Value

The Working Group would compile and review available information on catches, fishing effort, and biological parameters from different fleets; systematically identify information gaps, particularly in non-industrial fisheries; promote collaboration among scientists from CPCs and research centers; define research priorities; and organize collaborative technical workshops.

Its progress would be periodically reported to the SAC, ensuring integration into the Commission's formal scientific advisory process. Given the existing data limitations, the Working Group would adopt a gradual approach, prioritizing actions according to data availability and technical feasibility.

Strategically, this mechanism would facilitate the transition from fragmented efforts toward the development and adoption of a Strategic Plan for Billfish, reduce uncertainties in stock assessments, improve scientific advice, and strengthen the IATTC's capacity to implement modern fisheries management approaches.

Support and Resources

The activities of the Working Group could be financed through voluntary contributions and external technical cooperation, without generating additional costs for the Commission. The growing interest of the private sector — particularly stakeholders linked to recreational fishing — in providing funding, data, logistical support, and technical capacities represents an important additional asset.

The Working Group would provide a formal platform to channel these contributions under frameworks that ensure transparency and the appropriate use of information.

Leadership and Next Steps

The Republic of Panama expresses its interest in leading this initiative and commits to facilitating the technical and political dialogue necessary for its consolidation, in coordination with CPCs and the IATTC Secretariat.

Panama invites CPCs to share their views and potential contributions regarding this conceptual proposal and expresses its willingness to engage in informal consultations and technical exchange processes prior to the upcoming meetings of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, including the SAC.