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Submission: Review of sustainability measures for Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR 1) for 2024–25.

Recommendations

1. **The Minister supports** the proposed increase in the Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR 1) ACE of 84 tonnes (t) from 1 April 2025.
2. **The Minister supports** the proposed increase in the Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR 1) for the 2025–26 fishing year and sets the Total Allowable Catch as follows –
 - a. Increase the Total Allowable Catch by 89 t to 234 t.
 - b. Increase the allowance set aside for Recreational interests by 5 t to 30 t.
 - c. Increase the Total Allowable Commercial Catch by 84 t to 200 t.
 - d. Retain the allowance set aside for Customary Māori at 0.5 t.
 - e. Retain the allowance set aside for All other mortality caused by fishing at 3.5 t.
3. The Minister and Fisheries New Zealand recognise the social and economic potential of a 30 t recreational fishery for Pacific bluefin tuna in New Zealand.
4. The Minister and Fisheries New Zealand note that NZSFC and LegaSea will continue to promote responsible fishing practices in the tuna fishery.

The submitters

5. The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council (**NZSFC**) appreciates the opportunity to submit on the proposals for the future management of Pacific bluefin tuna (**TOR 1**). Fisheries New Zealand (**FNZ**) advice of consultation was received on 13 December 2024, with submissions due by 29 January 2025.
6. The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council is a recognised national sports organisation with over 37,000 affiliated members from 55 clubs nationwide. The Council has initiated LegaSea to generate widespread awareness and support for the need to restore abundance in our inshore marine environment. Also, to broaden NZSFC involvement in marine management advocacy, research, education and alignment on behalf of our members and LegaSea supporters. www.legasea.co.nz. Together we are '*the submitters*'.
7. The submitters are committed to ensuring that sustainability measures and environmental management controls are designed and implemented to achieve the Purpose and Principles of the Fisheries Act 1996, including "maintaining the potential of fisheries resources to meet the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations..." [s8(2)(a) Fisheries Act 1996]
8. Our representatives are available to discuss this submission in more detail if required. We look forward to positive outcomes from this review and would like to be kept informed of future developments. Our contact is Helen Pastor, secretary@nzsportfishing.org.nz.

Background

9. Pacific bluefin tuna is internationally managed as a single stock throughout the Pacific Ocean by the Western Central Pacific Commission (**WCPFC**) and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (**IATTC**). It is predominantly a northern hemisphere species with a single spawning ground between Japan and the Philippines, and juveniles off North America. New Zealand is a member of the WCPFC, which sets the international Total Allowable Catch in this region of the Pacific Ocean.
10. New Zealand's historic catch of Pacific bluefin has been significantly below the Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) and WCPFC limit set, however, commercial catches increased from a low of 12 tonnes (t) in 2013–14 to 103 t in 2022–23 and again in 2023–24, to 113 t.
11. Commercially caught Pacific bluefin is primarily caught as bycatch in the surface longline (**SLL**) fishery which targets southern bluefin tuna, and to a lesser extent the swordfish fishery. A small amount of catch is targeted. The fishing year runs from 1 October to 30 September.
12. In 2004, a target recreational fishery developed off the west coast of the South Island targeting Pacific bluefin tuna that feed on spawning aggregations of hoki. Fish of 200 kg to 350 kg were readily caught when hoki trawlers hauled their nets to the surface. The fishery gained international attention, and a recreational charter fishery operated out of Greymouth and West Port mainly in August and September.

13. A recreational allowance of 1 t was set in 2004. To recognise the growth of the fishery, the recreational allowance was increased to 25 t in 2011. Catch rates and recreational fishing effort has declined since 2015.
14. There is limited data available on the recreational harvest of Pacific bluefin, however, club records and anecdotal reports indicate that catch has been increasing, as has commercial catch in recent years.
15. A high proportion of Pacific Ocean catches during 1952–2022 were composed of juvenile Pacific bluefin; catch of age 0 fish has increased significantly since early 1990s, but the total catch in weight has declined since the mid-2000s, and due to stricter controls on fish 30 kg or less.
16. The stock assessment results show that the spawning stock biomass (SSB)¹ fluctuated throughout the 1983–2022 fishing years, SSB steadily declined from 1996 to 2010, and has rapidly increased since 2011.
17. The SSB of Pacific bluefin in 2022 was estimated to be 144 483 t, more than 10 times its historical low in 2010. An increase in immature fish (0–3 year olds) was observed in 2016–2019, likely a result of reduced fishing mortality on juvenile fish. This in turn led to an increase in SSB after 2019.
18. At its latest meeting in December 2024, it was agreed by the WCPFC to increase New Zealand’s national limit for Pacific bluefin tuna. Biomass has been increasing faster than expected and commercial catches have increased, the estimated growth represents a utilisation opportunity.
19. The WCPFC has increased the New Zealand's allocation of the international catch limit to 200 tonnes, with a provision for a 35 tonne per year carry forward amount.

Proposals for Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR)

20. To give effect to the WCPFC decision Fisheries New Zealand (FNZ) has released a [Discussion Paper No: 2024/32](#). The discussion document covers two proposals, an in-season proposal to increase Annual Catch Entitlement (ACE) for commercial fishers by 84 tonnes in the 2024–2025 fishing year and a similar proposal which will increase the TAC from 1 October 2025. If approved, the in-season increase would take effect no later than 1 April 2025 (**Table 1**).

Table 1: Proposed in-season increase (in tonnes) for TOR 1 during the 2024/25 fishing year.

Option	TAC	TACC	Additional ACE	Allowances		
				Customary Māori	Recreational	All other mortality caused by fishing
<i>Current settings</i>	145	116	-	0.5	25	3.5
Option 1	229 (↑ 84)	116	84	0.5	25	3.5

¹ Spawning stock biomass (SSB) is the estimated combined weight of all mature tuna in a population that can reproduce.

21. Additionally, FNZ are proposing to increase the TOR 1 TAC for the 2025–26 fishing year. The proposed increase will include an increase in the allowance set aside for recreational interests by 5 t and an increase in TACC by 84 t (**Table 2**). No change is proposed to the allowance for other sources of mortality. If approved, this will come into effect from 1 October 2025.

Table 2: Proposed management option (in tonnes) for TOR 1 from 1 October 2025.

Option	TAC	TACC	Allowances		
			Customary Māori	Recreational	All other mortality caused by fishing
<i>Current settings</i>	145	116	0.5	25	3.5
Option 1	234 (↑ 89)	200 (↑ 84)	0.5	30 (↑ 5)	3.5

NZSFC Discussion

22. New Zealand has a world class gamefish fishery especially for striped marlin, yellowtail kingfish and southern bluefin tuna. Total economic activity of this fishery was estimated to be \$381 million in 2015, and participation has increased since then. There was an active fishery for large PBT of the South Island West Coast that attracted domestic and international tourists. These fish arriving in late August and September were post spawned without the fat content to be commercial valuable. Sadly, the schools got smaller and then they were absent. There were no recruits, and the global population had been overfished for decades.
23. Commercial fishers were catching small PBT in New Zealand three or 4 years ago and it seems each year the size has increased. This is a welcomed return for the species that is at the southern edge of its range. There are increased fishing opportunities, but caution is also required.
24. The PBT stock assessment shows there has been a recovery in the spawning stock biomass based on Catch Per Unit of Effort (**CPUE**) increases. However, problems have been identified around model assumptions and CPUE based assessments overestimating stocks that are rebuilding and fisher behaviour changes. The WCPFC Scientific Committee identified concerns that the probability that the biomass was above the rebuilding reference point may have been overestimated because stock assessment uncertainty may have been underestimated. The assumptions around recruitment and steepness were questioned.
25. A collaboration between Tag-A-Giant, Stanford University, University of Auckland and Blue Water Marine Research deployed pop-off satellite archival tags on large Pacific bluefin off Greymouth and Westport in August and September. A total of 45 tuna were tagged over three seasons (2006=9, 2007=15, 2008=23). Estimated fish weights ranged from 190–425 kg (265.3 ± 51.5). Elapsed time from hookup to release ranged from 15–195 minutes (73.6 ± 45.3). Tags remained attached for 13–180 days (103.6 ± 51.2) before releasing and transmitting. Three tags were subsequently recovered after washing up on beaches. The tracks of individual fish show the fish initially moved north then stayed below 30 degrees south in Tasman Sea or north and east of New Zealand. The tags that remained attached the longest show movement

south in December, January and February (Figure 1). No mortality events post release were recorded by the tags, but transmissions were not received from six tags.

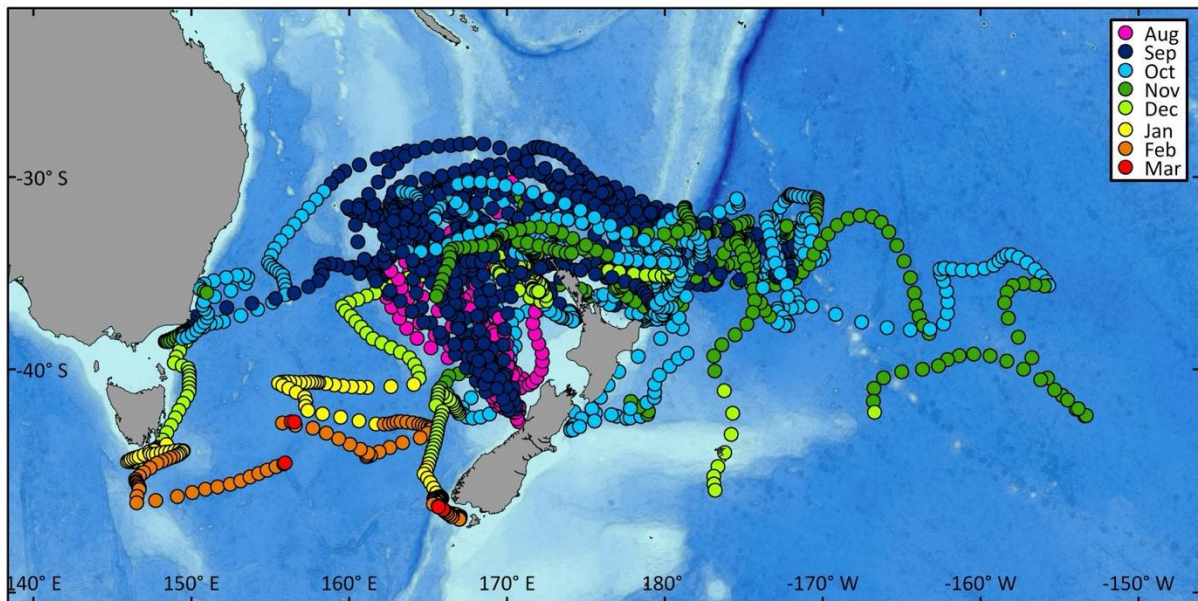


Figure 1: Estimated locations of all Pacific bluefin tuna from pop-up satellite archival tag data by month. Fish tagged in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

26. **The submitters support the 5 t increase in the TOR 1 recreational allowance for 2025–26.**
NZSFC has noted the structural change in the recreational fishing charter fleet with fewer long range game fishing boats and significant increases in offshore capable trailer boats owned by private fishers who travel to where the fish are. This has been a feature of the southern bluefin tuna fishery.
27. Pacific bluefin tuna grow to a larger size than southern bluefin and the locations where TOR have been caught have increased. In October 2024 there were TOR hooked and landed close to Cape Brett. The average weight of these fish was about 200 kg. The availability of these fish in inshore waters on the east coast means recreational fishers have the potential to catch a 30 t overall allowance in good years. Southern bluefin tuna are seldom caught of East Northland, so interest in whether TOR return in spring 2025 is high.
28. **The submitters recommend** that the Minister supports the proposed increase in the Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR 1) ACE of 84 t from 1 April 2025.
29. **The submitters recommend** that the Minister supports the proposed increase in the Pacific bluefin tuna (TOR 1) for the 2025–26 fishing year and sets the Total Allowable Catch as follows:
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