

Tuna fleet on the shoals

By DOUG FRASER
STAFF WRITER

Where have all the bluefin tuna gone? For the second year in a row, fishermen saw few, if any, of these giant fish. The question now is whether overfishing or changing migratory patterns is responsible for why the country's most valuable fish per pound has been missing from New England waters.

According to state Division of Marine Fisheries biologist Brad Chase, the past two years have both marked historic low landings for bluefin.

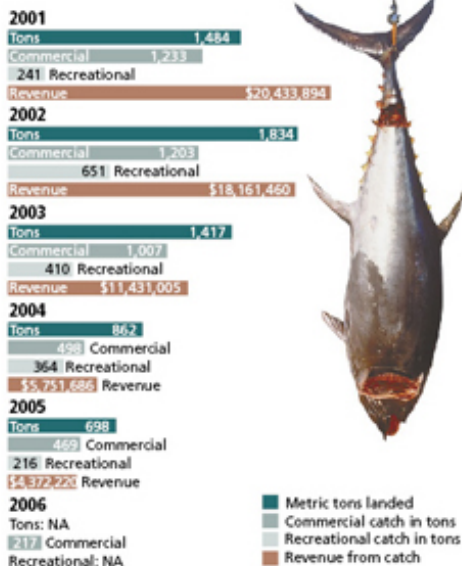
In more than 50 years of keeping records on bluefin tuna catches in New England, 2006 was the worst on record by far, with commercial fishermen catching less than 14 percent of the quota of fish allocated to them.

Atlantic bluefin tuna are highly prized by the Japanese and can fetch \$9 and more per pound for a fish that can reach 10 feet in length and weigh over 1,400

pounds. Because each individual fish is worth thousands of dollars, over 5,000 commercial fishermen along the Atlantic coastline pursue them each year as they migrate north in the summer and south in the fall. They are typically seen in New England waters from June to November.

WHERE ARE THE TUNA?

Landings have fallen precipitously in recent years



Source: 1996-2005 BFT data report, Leather

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Lost profits

"Last year's tuna season never happened," said Andy Baler, owner of Nantucket Fish Co. in Chatham and Dennis. Baler processes tuna caught in Cape waters

for shipment to Japan for the sushi market there.

Baler used to process 800 giant tuna in a season. Last year, he handled just 60.

"Tuna really helps the commercial guys. When you catch five or six giants, that puts \$20,000 in the house," he said.

Along with many New England fishermen, Baler believes that bluefin tuna are bypassing near-shore waters and heading to Canada because the inshore stocks of herring have all been caught by large vessels towing huge nets. Canada does not allow these vessels to fish inshore areas.

Peter Baker of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, hopes that recently passed regulations that ban the bigger herring boats from fishing inshore waters along the Gulf of Maine will leave enough fish to attract bluefin to coastal waters this summer.

"Tuna (season) was a huge part of the year for our fleet," said Baker. "With the collapse of cod, the shutdown on dogfish and with no tuna, it's the perfect trifecta."

Chase said that protecting herring might help, but he believes the problem is more on a worldwide scale.

European fishermen blamed

Bluefin tuna are known to cross the Atlantic and mix with their Eastern Atlantic cousins. They may be getting caught by fishermen over there who are catching unsustainable amounts of fish.

Baler served as an adviser to the International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, said that a meeting held this past fall in which the United States attempted to coerce European countries into ending overfishing of bluefin tuna was unsuccessful.

"They'll still harvest twice what they're allowed," Baler said of the Europeans. "What's 2,300 mt (U.S. quota in metric tons) when someone else is catching 20,000 mt?"

"They're not willing to change from the economic plan they have," Chase agreed.

That includes "tuna ranches" in which bluefin are corralled in large floating pens, and held hoping for the best price on the Japanese market. These fish are often not counted against the quotas allocated to these countries. Baler said that, if pressed, countries like Turkey will just leave ICCAT and fish without the imposed quotas.

But National Marine Fisheries Service Chief Scientist Steve Murawski said that the latest research on bluefin migration does not show enough mixing of the two stocks to support that overfishing by European fishermen is a major reason for New England's decline in landings.

William Hogarth, the director of the National Marine Fisheries Service, is also the chairman of ICCAT and has been pushing the U.S. case that Europe needs

to control its fishermen.

But Murawski said there is evidence that the population of bluefin tuna in the U.S. is in serious decline and the country has an obligation to prevent overfishing. He said that would not result in any lowering of quotas already set for the 2007 fishing year that begins in May.

It does mean, however, that NMFS will try harder to protect spawning grounds in the Gulf of Mexico. Fishing for bluefin is banned in the Gulf during their spawning time in June, but NMFS plans to put fishery observers on other types of fishing vessels that might inadvertently catch them.

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