

**REPORT OF THE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH AND STATISTICS (SCRS)**

(Madrid, Spain –October 5 to 9, 2009)

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16.4 Elaboration of a Bluefin Tuna Research Program

The Committee reviewed the research program proposal submitted by the SCRS Chairman, after consulting with attending SCRS scientists, to the Commission at its meeting in 2008 (ICCAT 2009). This research proposal built upon those first developed by SCRS in 2002 and subsequently revised in 2005, but for which no positive indications of joint support by the Contracting Parties had been received yet, although some research elements in those proposals had been initiated through National funding. Although these research elements have contributed to our knowledge base for bluefin, they have not yet been of sufficient scale and degree of coordination to substantially improve the scientific advice SCRS provides the Commission. In view of this, the Commission was further advised that a comprehensive and well coordinated Atlantic-wide research program, with an expected cost of 19 million Euros and six year duration, was required to:

- A) **Improve basic data collection** through data mining (including information from farms, observers, and VMS), developing methods to estimate sizes of fish caged, elaborating accurate CPUE indices for Mediterranean purse seine fleets, development of fisheries-independent information surveys, and implementing a large scale well planned conventional and genetic tagging experiment;
- B) **Improve understanding of key biological and ecological processes** through electronic tagging experiments to determine habitat and migration routes, broad-scale biological sampling on live fish to be tagged and dead fish being landed (e.g. gonad, liver, otolith, spines, etc.), histological analyses to determine bluefin tuna reproductive state and potential, and biochemical and genetics analyses to investigate mixing and population structure; ecological processes, including predator-prey relationships; and,
- C) **Improve assessment models and provision of scientific advice** on stock status through improved modelling of key biological processes (including growth and stock-recruitment), further developing stock assessment models including mixing between various areas, and developing and use of biologically realistic operating models for more rigorous management option testing.

A number of Contracting Parties expressed a willingness to make extra-budgetary contributions to such a program with a view towards initiation of activities in 2009 related to program coordination, data mining, aerial surveys, and tagging design studies, with additional research activities to be undertaken in subsequent years. The first-year costs for initiating these activities are anticipated at €750,000 and following a solicitation for extra-budgetary contributions for the program circulated to Contracting Parties in March 2009, as of October 1, 2009, voluntary contributions sufficient to initiate the year 1 activities have been jointly committed from the EC, United States, Japan, Canada, Norway, Croatia, Turkey, and Chinese Taipei while Morocco has indicated interest in future contributions (both direct funding and in-kind) to the program. In further support for this research initiative, stakeholders can contribute in different ways, such as providing in-kind support or perhaps even financial contributions if the Commission deems it appropriate. In-kind contributions that are already ongoing or have been offered include: obtaining biological samples (tissue, gonads, muscle, liver, hard parts), aerial surveys, acoustic surveys, and vessel time and crew to assist scientific campaigns. Several stakeholders have already made initial contacts with SCRS scientists about this (e.g., Balfegó Group, Mitsubishi Corp., Federation of Maltese Aquaculture Producers, and others).

The Committee enthusiastically endorsed the framework of the research program plan and recommended quickly proceeding with an open advertisement to fill the critical leadership role of Program Coordination, as soon as possible, with an eye to filling the position in early 2010 (February).

The Committee considers it imperative to quickly fill this critical position to facilitate successful implementation of the research program and recommends the successful candidate possess the qualifications detailed in the attached position profile (**Appendix 11**). The Working Group further recommended forming a Steering Committee comprised of the SCRS Chair, Executive Secretary and/or his Assistant, bluefin tuna rapporteurs, and an outside expert with substantial experience in similar research undertakings for other tuna RFMOs to guide and refine the Program, as necessary.