

**LETTER FROM PA2 CHAIR ON WESTERN ATLANTIC BFT STOCK
WAY FORWARD (ROUND 3 OF CORRESPONDANCE PERIOD)**
(Circular #8370)

4 December 2020

Dear Panel 2 members:

I hope this letter finds you and your colleagues fine.

This letter deals with the western Atlantic BFT stock (WBFT) only. Since we are going into the third round, we are supposed to finish discussion.

In response to PA2-608A, several CPCs as well as observers provided comments. There are basically three issues remaining: the TACs, the 2021 WBFT stock assessment and the increase in the carry-over percentage. It also became clear that these issues are linked and should be looked at as a whole package and that CPCs should prioritize their issues. To find a consensus, I organized a series of informal consultations among concerned CPCs.

In the informal discussion, the following points were considered.

(1) TAC

In PA2-608A, I proposed:

"3. The annual total allowable catch (TAC), inclusive of dead discards, of 2,350 t is established for 2021."

"4. The annual TAC in Paragraph 3 shall be reviewed and amended, as appropriate, in 2021 by the Commission on the advice of the SCRS. The Commission at its 2021 meeting shall endorse the TACs for 2022 and 2023 at 1,685 t and 1,632 t, respectively unless the Commission decides otherwise based on new SCRS advice. In support of this work, CPCs shall make special efforts, inter alia, to update abundance indices and other fishery indicators and provide them to the SCRS."

Several CPCs supported this while others supported my original proposal (PA2-608) or only 2,350 for 2021. PEW supported my original proposal.

One of the points raised by CPCs is that the Commission should follow the advice of the SCRS and achieve F0.1 in one year. This was also expressed by PEW. I confirmed with the SCRS Chair that the SCRS provided six different scenarios for TACs in the next three years so that the Commission could consider trade-offs while keeping the aim of achieving the F0.1 strategy in 2023 at the latest. This means that if the Commission wishes to attach more importance to the time required to go back to F0.1, it should choose Scenario 5. On the other hand, if the Commission wishes to attach more importance to alleviation of economic difficulties of the industry, it should choose Scenario 1 or 3. In the view of the Panel 2 Chair and the SCRS Chair, as long as the Commission chooses one of the six Scenarios and specifies TACs for three years, it will be consistent with the SCRS advice although some scenarios are better than others if the Commission gives more priority to conservation.

Some people misunderstand that choosing Scenario 3, for example, is not consistent with the SCRS advice, but this is wrong. This is still within the SCRS advice. Perhaps one reason for such misunderstanding is the probability of achieving F0.1 in 2023 is less than 50% in Scenario 1 and 3. I also confirmed with the SCRS Chair that due to the limitation of the current projection techniques and models, it is not a simple task to fix the probability at 50% and get a combination of TACs that includes exactly a 50% probability. Rather, they first set different scenarios (TAC increments), run the computer models and see which catch is closest to the 50% probability. If they are requested to produce a scenario which results in exactly 50%, they would have to rerun model simulations many times, involving a huge amount of time. Note that a 50-t change in the projected TAC can result in as much as a 10% change in probability. Having said that, I must admit that

even with such technical difficulties Scenario 1 shows less than 50% in all three years and this is a bit suboptimal. On the other hand, Scenario 3 indicates 48% in 2023, which was provided by the SCRS as an approximation of the 50% probability of not overfishing. This is in line with the long-term commitment and practice of the Commission to ensure that overfishing is addressed with at least a 50% probability.

I also would like to point out that a one-year period for addressing overfishing under the F0.1 management strategy is extraordinarily short. While this period should be ideally as short as possible, demanding the achievement in one year would, in my view, be too drastic and is not feasible under the circumstances. I believe that a three-year period suggested by the SCRS is a reasonable one although it is ultimately up to the Commission to decide the duration. The SCRS Chair also confirmed that all scenarios, except Scenario 4, would end overfishing after 2 years (2022) with a minimum of approximately 50% probability.

(2) Stock assessment

In PA2-608A, I proposed:

“17. In 2021, the SCRS will conduct a full stock assessment for the western Atlantic bluefin tuna stock, including the review of the most recent available data such as abundance indices and stock mixing and provide advice to the Commission on the appropriate management measures, approaches, and strategies, including, inter alia, regarding TAC levels for that stock for future years. Such assessment shall be conducted in a way that does not negatively affect the other work of the SCRS, particularly the ongoing MSE work for BFT. In order to assist this work, an external expert shall be hired with a voluntary fund from Canada to review, prepare a report and present the findings to the BFT Species Group. No stock assessment shall be conducted in 2022.”

Several questions and concerns were raised. First, is it common for the SCRS to hire external experts to assist stock assessment and if so, what is the normal procedure for selecting experts? The SCRS Chair confirmed that this is a common practice of the SCRS, and experts will be selected by the Secretariat in accordance with the established procedures, and will review the assessment in a manner consistent with established SCRS practices. Second, a concern was expressed again on the possible negative effects of the new stock assessment on the BFT MSE. The SCRS Chair confirmed that he is confident that the revised SCRS schedule currently proposed will prevent this from happening as long as the conditions mentioned in PA2-617 are met (please see the last paragraph in Page 1 of my letter). In fact, the revised SCRS calendar was developed to ensure that the time allocated for MSE was not in conflict with the proposed WBFT Stock assessment, which means that independent time will be allocated for MSE. Third, and this is somewhat related to the second one, if new data up to and including 2020 are available, can CPCs provide them in time and in that case can the Secretariat process them in time? The SCRS Chair confirmed that the provision of 2020 data from CPCs will require extra efforts of CPCs and definitely extra efforts of the Secretariat, but even if the 2020 data are not available, the assessment will still be valid and worthwhile with the 2019 data (the previous assessment used 2018 data). Note that the data for 2019 would be available as part of the regular data schedule and requires little or no additional work for the Secretariat. Fourth, a concern was expressed on a possible delay of the preparatory work for the assessment due to COVID-19 and if compensation for such delay is required, it is likely to negatively affect the BFT MSE. The SCRS Chair confirmed that if the preparatory work does not proceed as scheduled, and a risk affecting the calendar for the BFT MSE arises, the SCRS will, in view of the priority given to the BFT MSE, postpone the assessment to 2022 as originally scheduled. No change in the MSE process or schedule is anticipated at this point.

(3) Carry-over

In PA2-608A, I proposed replacing para 7(a) with the following based on the proposal of Canada:

“7. (a) Any underharvest of a CPC’s total quota in a given year may be carried forward to the next year. However, in no event shall the underharvest that is carried forward exceed 10% of the CPC’s initial quota allocation under paragraph 6, with the exception of UK (in respect of Bermuda), France (in respect of St. Pierre and Miquelon), and Mexico (i.e., those with initial allocations of 130 t or less), for which the underharvest that is carried forward shall in no event exceed 100% of the initial allocation under paragraph 6 (i.e., the total quota for such CPC shall not exceed twice its annual quota in any given year).*

**As an exception to this rule, for a temporary basis, the underharvest that is carried forward from 2020 onward may not exceed 25% of the CPC’s initial quota allocation in paragraph 6.”*

Several CPCs opposed this as carry-over should be, in principle, avoided as much as possible since it complicates management and 25% is too big for the stock which is experiencing overfishing. Several CPCs also said that even if some increase should be permitted, it shall be for only one year. Canada confirmed that this is acceptable, but requested any increase, if 25% is not acceptable, given the current difficult situation caused by COVID-19. I explained that looking at other cases, 25% is a little bit too large, but 20% may be OK because in the case of South Atlantic swordfish, which is overfished, 20% carry-over is allowed. However, some CPCs still maintain that no increase should be allowed. It should be noted that Canada supports 1,785 t for 2021, which means that the total available allocation for Canada in 2021 would be 518.38 t (its initial quota (389.48 t) + limit of 25% carry-over from 2020 based on 2020 initial quota (128.9 t)). If the TAC for 2021 is set at 2,350 and 10% carry-over is maintained, the total available allocation for Canada in 2021 would be 567.15 t (its initial quota (515.59 t) + limit of 10% carry-over from 2020 based on 2020 initial quota (51.56 t)), which is 48.77 t more than the former case.

Taking all these points into consideration, I suggested a package as follows:

(1) TACs

Basically the same as those in 608A (based on Scenario 3)

(2) Stock assessment

A stock assessment for WBFT will be conducted in 2021 with the following text to be inserted in the report to the Commission:

“Panel 2 agreed to recommend to the plenary that a stock assessment for the western Atlantic BFT be conducted in 2021, one year earlier than the SCRS original plan. In relation to this agreement, Panel 2 understood that: (i) the proposed meeting for the stock assessment in September 2021 as well as the preparatory work required to conduct the assessment will not negatively affect the ongoing MSE process for BFT and if the SCRS considers a negative impact to be unavoidable, MSE will be given priority and the 2021 SCRS advice to the Commission on WBFT will be based on the 2020 stock assessment; (ii) if the preparatory work does not proceed as planned, the SCRS will postpone the assessment to 2022; and (iii) the external expert will be contracted and perform the required work in accordance with standard SCRS and Secretariat practices and procedures and will be supported by the Commission budget with a voluntary fund from Canada.”

(3) Carry-over

Maintaining the current 10%.

After a series of informal talks through web meetings and e-mail exchanges, however, **Panel 2 could not agree to the package**. Therefore, I am now proposing a roll-over of Rec. 17-06 for one year with the exception of paragraph 17 because the next stock assessment for WBFT will be conducted in 2022 as originally scheduled by the SCRS rather than 2021. Please see PA2-608B for more details.

Please note that we are in the third round of discussion and if we do not find any consensus even on this proposal, there will be no measures for WBFT in 2021.

Even though the general rule is to set a two-week period for comments, I suggest only one week this time as Panel 2 is far behind other Panels and committees and we need to finish all the business as soon as possible. The exact deadline will be specified by the Secretariat as it depends on their translation.

Best regards,



Shingo Ota, *Chair of Panel 2*