

Statement from Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago regarding concerns about landing limits for blue marlin and white marlin/roundscale spearfish

Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago would like to express their deepest appreciation to the European Union and Cyprus for hosting the 24th Special Meeting of ICCAT. We would also like to thank the Executive Secretary, Mr Manel, and the Secretariat for their excellent work and support throughout the year and for the preparation of this meeting.

Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago would like to bring to attention their concerns regarding ICCAT's treatment of overharvesting of blue marlin and white marlin/roundscale spearfish by small-island developing States, under Recommendation 19-05.

Blue marlin and white marlin support both recreational and commercially important fisheries and livelihoods in the Caribbean, and also contribute to food security. As a result of declining populations, ICCAT Recommendation 19-05 sets an annual limit of 1,670 t for blue marlin and of 355 t for white marlin/roundscale spearfish with effect from 2020. Recommendation 19-05 also sets out that any excess of landings limits in any given year shall be deducted from the respective limits during or before the adjustment year, with an additional reduction by at least 125% of the excess harvest if the prescribed landings limits are exceeded during two consecutive years. Recommendation 19-05 also indicates that beginning with 2020 catches, under-harvest of limits may not be carried forward to a subsequent year.

Over the period of the ICCAT rebuilding programs for blue marlin and white marlin/roundscale spearfish, annual catches of marlins for Caribbean countries have often been above the prescribed annual limits due to a number of factors, with the main one being that fishing occurs in marlin-rich waters. Therefore, while marlins may not be the target species in some instances, they are not discarded because of their commercial value as well as importance for food security and traditional local consumption.

The 2024 blue marlin stock assessment indicated that the current stock status is overfished but not subject to overfishing¹. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago support the recommendation of the 2024 Meeting of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) to adopt limits corresponding to true catch (i.e., landings + dead discards) instead of adopting limits (such as those in Rec. 19-05). Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago also agree on the importance of CPCs reporting total catch of blue marlin (i.e., landings and dead discards). In this regard, we are participating in the regional Global Environment Facility (GEF) project "Strategies, technologies, and social solutions to manage bycatch in tropical Large Marine Ecosystem Fisheries (REBYC-III CLME+)" which directly addresses discards data collection and monitoring for our longline fleets.

Regarding Atlantic white marlin, the results of the 2019 assessment indicated that the stock was overfished but not undergoing overfishing¹. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago share the Committee's concern about the status of white marlin due to misidentification of roundscale spearfish which adds uncertainty to the stock assessment results. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago strongly agree that:

- Measures should be taken to ensure complete monitoring and reporting of all landings and discards, including live releases; and
- Efforts should be made to fully account for the artisanal and recreational catches.

Based on the distribution and biological characteristics of the stocks in areas under national jurisdiction, historical landings, interests, fishing patterns and practices, and contribution to food security, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago re-emphasize that marlin limits should be adopted corresponding to true catch. Furthermore, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago are deeply concerned over the application of an additional 25% penalty of phantom catch overage, noting that as worded in Rec. 19-05, regardless of whether a CPC manages to constrain subsequent annual landings to below the allotted annual limits, the accrued adjusted landing limits will continue to be reduced in each successive year on a compound basis.

¹ https://www.iccat.int/Documents/Meetings/Docs/2024/Reports/2024_SCRS_ENG.pdf

As such the CPC is perpetually punished with no realistic mechanism for relief or reward for efforts to compliantly restrict annual catches, as well as making any viable payback plan within a reasonable time frame impossible. This methodology is therefore grossly prejudicial to the food security and livelihood of small-island developing coastal States whose fishing communities are greatly dependent on these stocks, and are furthermore limited in capacity to reduce catch rates of these species, without causing significant deleterious socioeconomic impacts on both fishing communities and the wider populations.

In conclusion Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago assert that ICCAT Rec. 19-05 does not consider the *Criteria for the Allocation of Fishing Possibilities* (Res. 15-13) nor the provisions in Article 24 of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement which recognize the special requirements of developing States and in particular, small island developing States. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago therefore strongly urge the Commission to re-evaluate the provisions of this Recommendation relating to allotted landing limits, the imposition of the 125% penalty on overages, and payback of excess landings especially in the context of Caribbean CPCs.