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**Statement to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission
14th Regular Session of the Northern Committee
3-7 September 2018 – Fukuoka, Japan**

The Pew Charitable Trusts welcomes the opportunity to participate as an observer in both the upcoming 14th Regular Session of the Northern Committee (NC14) of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Joint Working Group Meeting on the Management of Pacific bluefin tuna. Both meetings will provide the opportunity for members to reaffirm their commitment to recovering the severely depleted Pacific bluefin tuna population. It will also be a chance for countries to look towards the future and make progress towards agreeing on long-term management objectives and developing a more robust harvest strategy using management strategy evaluation (MSE). With the stock in such a dire state, and large uncertainty about the future direction of the population, current management measures and catch limits should remain in place until a full benchmark stock assessment can be carried out in 2020.

The 2018 ISC Pacific bluefin stock assessment update confirmed that the population remains at critically low levels, at just 3.3 percent of its historic, unfished size. Overfishing still continues, with fishing rates more than twice as high as maximum sustainable levels. Alarming, catch limits are not being respected, with four of the five main fishing countries exceeding their allocated quotas in the last two years. These overages undermine the recovery plan agreed to by all parties and decrease the accuracy of the projections of future population growth, which assume that catch is limited by the quotas.

Further, the future projections are heavily influenced by the most recent recruitment estimate, which the ISC has indicated is relatively uncertain, due to the fact that it is only based on one data point. The predictions of successful long-term recovery of the species also depend on the assumption that recruitment will stay above levels that have not been consistently seen in over two decades. When recruitment is assumed to remain at recent levels, there is only a 3% chance that the rebuilding plan will be successful under current catch limits.

Due to the current status of the population, the uncertainty of the recent recruitment estimate, the large impact of that estimation on the trajectory of the future projections, and the need for precaution in the early years of the recently adopted rebuilding plan, Pew strongly urges that the Joint Working Group and NC14 recommend that the current management measure be maintained until a full benchmark stock assessment confirms the recent estimates of stock trajectory and recruitment levels.

It is inexcusable to increase catch limits when overfishing is still occurring and current quotas are being violated. **NC14 should also reject the proposed carry over provision, a practice which is “not considered to be good practice in fisheries management” by experts in the management of tuna, “particularly so where there is no certainty surrounding the monitoring, control and surveillance of the fishery.”**¹ The only change that should be made to the measure is that limits should be converted from percentages of the 2002-04 levels into metric tons and annual quotas should be presented in an allocation table to increase clarity and transparency.

Instead of focusing on increasing limits, the Joint Working group and NC14 should carry out the activities it agreed to in its workplan, including supporting the ISC MSE process by starting discussion on identifying one candidate long-term target reference point, two candidate limit reference points and candidate harvest control rules. They should also make progress on development of a Catch Document Scheme, which is already behind the schedule agreed to in 2016.

Both the Joint Working Group and the Northern Committee made large and encouraging steps with the development and adoption of the secondary rebuilding target and long-term rebuilding plan in 2017. Now is the time to continue that commitment to returning the population to healthy levels. The population will never fully recover if there is a rush to increase catch at any sign of improvement in the stock status. While the 2018 assessment estimated population growth, the stock remains at just 3.3% of its unfished level, less than half of the already-low initial rebuilding target. **Effective management does not rely on the hope that recruitment will remain at high levels, but instead is based on responsible, sustainable quotas that take into account uncertainty surrounding current and future conditions.** Pew looks forward to continuing to work with both groups to support the successful recovery of this important and iconic species.

¹ ICCAT. 2009. Report of the Independent Performance Review of ICCAT. https://iccat.int/Documents/Other/PERFORM_%20REV_TRI_LINGUAL.pdf