

Stakeholder Perspectives: Issues and Challenges in the U.S. West Coast Swordfish Fishery

Panel Session

This panel brought together fisheries managers, scientists, fishermen, seafood distributors, and conservationists to share their perspectives on the current issues in the fishery.

Discussion Questions

- **What do you see as the key issues occurring in the west coast swordfish fishery at this time? What issues are most important to you?**
- **What are the advantages to reversing the current trends and to have a viable U.S. west coast swordfish fishery?**
- **What obstacles or challenges do you see to improving the viability of and revitalizing the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery?**
- **What is your ideal future scenario for the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery and for a viable local west coast supply of swordfish?**

Panelists



Bill Sutton started fishing commercially at the age of sixteen. He had the fishing vessel “Aurelia” built when he was twenty-four. Bill has fished for different species on the west coast, from San Diego to Alaska, but primarily fishes for swordfish. Bill opened a seafood restaurant, Sea Fresh Ojai, in 1985 and a second location, Sea Fresh Channel Island Harbor, in 2000. He is an ex-board member of the California Gillnet Association and ex-President of the Ventura

County Fisherman’s Association. Presently, Bill sits on the PFMC HMS Advisory Subpanel and has been a part of that panel for the past eight years. Bill has also worked with legislators in California to enhance other fisheries for long-term benefits and sustainability.



Marija Vojkovich has been with the Marine Region of the California Department of Fish and Game for over 35 years. Her experience has been almost exclusively with management issues and she spent several years monitoring highly migratory species. On a personal level, Marija has first-hand knowledge of swordfish harpoon fishing.



Dave Rudie, a professional sea urchin diver, transformed his day job into the thriving seafood enterprise Catalina Offshore Products Inc. Diving for sea urchins and seaweed during the day, he and his wife Kathy would process them in their garage in the evenings. Thirty years later, Catalina Offshore Products has over eighty employees working in the San Diego plant and the product line has expanded to include a wide range of high quality fresh and frozen fish bought directly from reputable fishermen in Southern California and Baja California. Dave is also an underwater photographer and the board president of the San Diego Oceans Foundation.



Chuck Cook, a 30-year veteran of The Nature Conservancy, is a marine and fisheries conservation practitioner that works in tropical and temperate ocean environments with a strong focus on fisheries reform and habitat protection. Over the past 15 years, Chuck concentrated his efforts on improving the economic and environmental performance of the west coast groundfish fishery, anchoveta fishery

in the Humboldt Current, and coral reef fisheries in Indonesia and Micronesia. In 2005, Chuck led The Nature Conservancy's efforts in forming an alliance with non-governmental organizations, fishermen, and government regulators to execute a privately funded buyout of bottom trawling permits and vessels from California fishermen who wanted to leave the industry. From 2007 to 2010, Chuck was the project leader for the Sustainable Fisheries Group at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which encouraged the use of emerging market based tools that better align the economic interests of fishermen with the health of the ocean.



Tina Fahy is a fisheries biologist with NMFS, Protected Resources Division. Her experience over the last 12 years has been ensuring that federal and private actions off the coast of California are permitted, monitored, or mitigated to result in the least effect to protected species as allowed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and

the Endangered Species Act. In this work, the major challenge Tina faces is allowing industries to continue operating to meet the demands of the U.S. consumers and ensure a healthy domestic economy (e.g., domestic fisheries, power plants, retrofitting bridges to meet seismic safety concerns, dredging to allow safe passage of large vessels into ports, etc.) while providing allowable protections to marine species at the individual level, population level, and species levels.



Taryn Kiekow is a staff attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an environmental nonprofit, where she works primarily to protect marine mammals and their habitat. With regard to swordfish, she is involved in a petition asking NMFS to enforce Section 101(a)(2) of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which would require

the United States to ban swordfish imported from foreign countries whose fishing practices harm and kill more marine mammals than allowed by U.S. standards. She is also involved in an effort to protect the wild salmon fishery of Bristol Bay, Alaska from foreign mining interests. Prior to joining NRDC, Taryn was a litigation associate at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft and McKenna Long & Aldridge in Washington D.C., as well as a dolphin trainer at Sea World San Diego and the Miami Seaquarium.



Todd Steiner is the founder and executive director of Turtle Island Restoration Network and its primary projects: the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, Salmon Protection And Watershed Network (SPAWN), and GotMercury.org. Working with U.S. shrimpers in the 1990s, Todd launched the

Turtle-Safe® Shrimp Certification program. Prior to founding Turtle Island Restoration Network, Todd was the director of Earth Island Institute's Save the Dolphins Project (1986-89), which focused on reducing marine mammal mortality in the tuna purse-seine fishery. Todd currently serves as a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Marine Turtle Specialist Group, Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, Lagunitas Watershed Technical Advisory Committee, and as a member of Turtle Island Restoration Network's Board of Directors. Todd has a M.S. from Florida International University in Biology and a B.S. from the University of Maryland.



1. Current Issues

Economic viability of the fishery

- Reduced access to fishing grounds due to time and area closures
- Reduced fleet size and lack of new fishermen
- Lowered market prices for swordfish
- Increased fuel prices

Protections for endangered sea turtles

- Resulted in reduced west coast fishing opportunity to protect turtles
- Migratory turtles are impacted by foreign fleets throughout the Pacific Basin
- Impacts to nesting beaches in the Indo-Pacific are one of the most significant threats to turtle populations

Uneven playing field with other swordfish fisheries and imported swordfish products

- Harvest by foreign fleets occurs under less restrictive conservation measures
- Hawaii fleet has structural advantage of hard caps on incidental takes of sea turtles in large action area
- Imported swordfish undercuts prices of locally caught swordfish

2. Benefits & Advantages of Creating a More Viable Fishery

Ability to develop more sustainable fishing practices

- Achieved through focused research and development of cleaner gear and fishing methods
- Would generate greater income for U.S. fishermen
- Would increase the flow of goods to port communities along the west coast

Advancing sea turtle protections and other bycatch minimization practices on a global rather than local scale

- Export new sustainable fishing practices to other countries and fleets
- Lessen the global fishing and habitat impacts on sea turtles to improve recovery

Potential to leverage U.S. experience for greater success in international negotiations on conservation measures

- Legitimize the United States as a stronger stakeholder in the international fisheries management and conservation arena
- Greater influence on fishing practices of foreign fleets with demonstrated U.S. success

3. Obstacles & Challenges

Feasibility of regulatory changes

- Reconsidering time-area closures
- Changing management regimes such that they provide for more fishing opportunity

Ability to “keep our eye on the big picture” (i.e., Pacific Basin)

- Establishing allies for the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery
- Considering the use of MMPA import provisions to encourage foreign fleets to adopt more turtle protections

Building local success

- Obtaining exempted fishing permits to test gear modifications and new gear
- Accessing the PLCA off the central coast of California/southern Oregon
- Building awareness and markets for the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery to serve consumers interested in locally caught seafood

4. Ideal Future Scenario

A revitalized U.S. west coast swordfish fishery

- Increased access to the resource with lower operational costs. *“We need to fish where the fish are.”*
- Regulations and management regimes support fishing opportunities

Strong protections for sea turtles throughout their range

- No increased take of sea turtles in U.S. waters
- Foreign fishing fleets held to the same standards and protections as U.S. fleets
- Partnerships formed and actions taken in areas where adverse impacts to sea turtles and their habitats are greatest

Innovation and research ongoing and applied

- Recent findings and fishing experience on swordfish and sea turtle behavior used to prioritize research and/or develop tools to assist with avoidance of leatherbacks (i.e., particularly within the PLCA)
- Experiments with different bycatch-reducing gear, fishing depths, and bait types
- Partnerships formed between industry, environmental organizations, and others that jointly promote the advantages of locally caught swordfish



Panel Summary

This summary captures key points and perspectives during the panel and following discussions; it does not represent consensus views.

- **The U.S. west coast swordfish fishery struggles to maintain economic viability.** Speakers emphasized the crippling effects of fishing ground closures; shrinking fleet size and lack of a new generation of fishermen; an uneven playing field with imports harvested under less restrictive regulations; and other factors such as increasing fuel prices.
- **Sea turtles experience significant impacts outside of U.S. waters.** Several speakers emphasized the importance of addressing management of the entire North Pacific ecosystem when considering possible efforts to revitalize the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery. Several participants stressed that actions outside of the United States – unsound fishing practices by foreign fleets and impacts to nesting beaches and hatchlings in the Indo-Pacific – pose much greater risks to sea turtles than U.S. fisheries. Others mentioned that further restricting the already highly regulated U.S. west coast fishery will only serve to further cripple the fishery and coastal economies while delivering marginal environmental benefits. Many said that it was a better strategy if fishermen and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) joined forces and took action where the benefits to sea turtles and other protected species would be more significant. Others acknowledged the disparate impact but said that was not justification for increasing sea turtle interactions in U.S. waters.
- **U.S. west coast fishermen operate at a competitive disadvantage.** Panelists broadly agreed that U.S. swordfish fishermen experience an uneven playing field compared with foreign fleets that export swordfish to the United States and operate under less stringent turtle conservation measures than their U.S. counterparts. These foreign fisheries may not only cause more harm to sea turtles, several speakers said, but their imports may also affect the market as they undercut locally caught swordfish and drive prices down. The U.S. west coast fleet, other speakers suggested, is also disadvantaged relative to the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery because they are allowed to fish with hard caps on a higher number of turtle interactions.
- **The regulatory regime should be revisited.** Several speakers stressed the need to take a fresh look at existing time and area closures and management regimes, with a focus towards adapting regulations to reflect new information on swordfish and sea turtle behavior and recent developments in bycatch-reducing gear and methods elsewhere. Panelists strongly endorsed the importance of fostering opportunities for innovation and research; with several speakers pressing for gear testing with exempted fishing permits within the PLCA off of California.
- **Important benefits are tied to a revitalized west coast fishery.** Panelists noted that new opportunities for experimentation and research in the fishery will help the United States develop more sustainable fishing practices, which could be shared with other countries to help reduce international bycatch. A strong, sustainable U.S. fishery provides legitimacy and leverage for the United States in international fisheries negotiations. On the domestic side, a strong fishery would generate additional revenues to port communities and provide added quantities of local, sustainable seafood for U.S. consumers.
- **Consumer power and interest in sustainable seafood is of growing significance.** Many speakers suggested that the growing interest in sustainable and locally caught seafood offers an opportunity for the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery to build allies, awareness, and markets for its products. Panelists recommended industry look to creating new partnerships with NGOs and others to jointly promote the advantages of locally caught swordfish, while pressing for the use of MMPA import provisions. Several speakers noted the irony that consumer interest in locally caught seafood is increasing at a time when U.S. west coast fisheries are contracting overall.