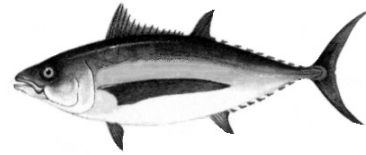


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The Vanishing American Albacore Fisherman

In the 1960s and '70s, the harbors along the West Coast were thriving communities of small-boat fishermen of which there were nearly three times the current number of 600 to 800 vessels fishing for albacore tuna. The abundance of albacore hasn't diminished; in fact, it is near the long-term abundance and not subject to overfishing. Every year fewer and fewer vessels are able to financially participate in the fishery. Prices have stagnated while costs are increasing and there are fewer opportunities to fish in other traditional fisheries due to privatization of formerly open access fisheries and the decline of salmon – another mainstay of the traditional West Coast hook-and-line fleet. Why has this happened, and what can be done to reestablish these traditional family-based fisheries?

The U.S. fleet and a similar fleets in British Columbia collectively harvest less than 15 percent of the total North Pacific albacore catch. The major portion of the catch is taken in fisheries conducted by other nations including Japan, which is the largest harvester nation. Historically, fisheries were fairly stable except for a period of high seas drift net fisheries during the 1970s, in which large volumes of albacore were taken. Most of this effort was abolished by international agreement, but some amount continues as illegal high seas drift net vessels are observed each year. Aside from the remaining illegal fishing, the albacore resource has improved, as has fishing. One would expect the stability of the resource within the historic fishing nations would improve the lot of U.S. fishermen, but forces continue to make the future economic health of this fishery doubtful.

This is the time of the year when U.S. family owned and operated fishing vessels head to sea to catch sustainable, healthful, local albacore tuna. As they have for the past 100 years, U.S. albacore pole-and-line fishermen on small boats, although in fewer numbers today, spend their summers out of sight of land in the blue waters searching for this tasty species. A major cause of the decrease in U.S. vessels is a consolidation of the fishing industry and export of processing to Asia. Today most of the traditional purchasers of American albacore are foreign-owned and U.S.-landed albacore has been replaced by Asian albacore taken and processed in countries with lower labor costs that also lack rigorous environmental protection laws. It is an increasingly difficult problem to compete in this environment. Increasing regulation adds to the problem, making it difficult for American fishermen to compete on the world market.

The expansion of Chinese fisheries into areas and species in which they have no historical presence is a growing problem. This may be the looming issue that finally does in the North American fishery. Until recently, the scope of the Chinese fishery was largely unknown but recently available Chinese statistics indicate the Chinese fleet is indeed growing and targeting albacore to a greater extent. The impact of the Chinese fleet is already evident in the growth of imports of Chinese albacore at prices below U.S. production

costs. The majority of U.S. fishermen favors fair competition and strongly believes they can produce a better product at a competitive price. The key is a level playing field.

Albacore, like all tuna, are migratory and fish caught off Oregon spawn off Japan. Due to albacore's highly migratory nature, its management is vested in international fishery management organizations that determine the level of fishing and other regulations. The authority is split between two organizations in the North Pacific: one for the Western and Central Pacific and one for the Eastern Pacific. U.S. vessels are subject to both, depending on their fishing location. The U.S. government has ceded management authority to the international organizations but can impose additional regulations to U.S. vessels through U.S. regional fishery management councils. In the case of the West Coast, it is the Pacific Fishery Management Council and National Marine Fisheries Service that can place additional regulatory restraints on the U.S. fleet above and beyond those mandated by the two international bodies.

The existing albacore fishery continues to be one of the few artisanal fisheries remaining on the West Coast and comprises mostly family businesses that often spend weeks at sea catching albacore on hand lines in sustainable methods. The U.S. troll and pole fisheries are fully certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) as sustainable fisheries that meet all of the U.N. standards for a well-managed fishery.

As stated above, the market for albacore is getting increasingly difficult and the margins of those in the fishery are eroding rapidly by the expansion of the Chinese fishery. After a few years of rising markets and prices to fishermen, 2013 has seen an increase in cheap Chinese fish entering markets in Europe and elsewhere, creating an impossible marketing condition for U.S. fishermen and processors. As fuel and operating costs rise, Chinese with fuel and other government subsidies can enter markets at severely low price points. Also, the Chinese have been involved heavily in the international management systems in the Pacific through the regional fishery management bodies and have signed onto resolutions not to expand effort beyond 2005 levels. Unfortunately, the system seems not to apply to them. On the other hand, U.S. regulators excited to look proactive in the eyes of the world are eager to limit U.S. fleet capacity as well as catch and effort. In addition, the West Coast fleet is faced with increased restrictions that increase operational costs and add another degree of non-competitiveness to the existing reduced U.S. albacore fleet. These are proposed regulations moving through the Pacific Fishery Management Council that are uniformly condemned by the fleet as unnecessary and unfair.

An example of proposed regulations is the requirement for having vessel monitoring devices that transmit the location of fishing vessels. The cost of installing and operating these devices is expensive. A primary reason for requiring them in other fisheries in the U.S. 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone is the existence of closed fishing areas and the need to ensure vessels aren't fishing in these areas. However, there are no such areas proscribed for albacore fishing and a great deal of fishing is conducted outside the U.S. EEZ. So if vessel monitoring regulation goes into effect, a U.S. vessel fishing 200 miles off San Francisco will have its every movement monitored while at the same time surrounded by foreign vessels having no monitoring at all. Seems a bit pointless, to say the least, and clearly increases operating costs with no clear regulatory or social benefit. Furthermore there are proposals to cap the U.S. harvest with harvest level controls that will apply only to U.S. vessels. The subject of curbs on fishing is an ongoing series of negotiations in the international arena. At present, there are no limits or national quotas or means of enforcing them if they existed. There is a sentiment among many of the environmental organizations that imply that setting regulations on U.S. fishermen will lead the way for other nations to follow. Unfortunately, history shows that unilateral action only leads to lost

opportunity for U.S. fishermen as the fishery moves to other nations.

Overburdening unilateral measures by the U.S. without regard for unchecked expansion by other countries threatens not only local fishermen but the consumer's access to locally produced wholesome and healthy fish. The U.S. now imports 90 percent of its seafood, much of which is under little or no management, unlike the U.S. fleet. Only about 30 percent of the U.S. catch is sold domestically, which is a big improvement since 10 years ago when it was about 5 percent. Albacore tuna has healthy Omega-3 levels equal to salmon and the price to the consumer is considerably less.

If this trend continues and countries such as China continue to ignore the very resolutions on effort they signed on to, any new rules and regulations on the U.S. fleet will matter little in 10 years. We would hope that members of the PFMCC, federal and state regulators and West Coast members of Congress will consider the plight of the small-boat artisanal fishermen and weigh the results of regulations that appear to be proactive and solve perceived problems that, in the long-term, cause only a continued decrease in a once thriving U.S. albacore fleet.

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