

Parliamentary Question No. 70

To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if consideration has been given to the proposal for the development of a recreational Bluefin Tuna Fishery made to him recently, if so the action he proposes to take; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

– Thomas Pringle.

For WRITTEN answer on Wednesday, 29th April, 2015.

Ref No: 16905/15

REPLY

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine : (Simon Coveney)

I am aware that the interested parties have recently been enquiring about the possible introduction of recreational fishing for Bluefin tuna in Ireland.

By way of background let me say that Atlantic bluefin tuna is a highly regulated species with annual catch limits set by the *International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) based on scientific advice. A management plan was put in place by ICCAT in 2007 to address the alarming depletion in stock levels. This resulted in greatly reduced annual catch limits in the Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic Ocean in an effort to rebuild stocks.*

Within the EU, quota shares were allocated over ten years ago to Member States based on track record. Ireland, which did not have a track record of fishing for bluefin tuna, does not have a quota. We have access *to a small by-catch quota for Bluefin tuna in our pelagic fisheries only. However, this by-catch quota is also available to other Member States, and cannot be used for recreational and/or sport fisheries.*

The unequivocal advice we have received from the EU Commission is that a recreational fishery for bluefin tuna is not legally possible in the absence of a national bluefin tuna quota. We do not have such a quota and it is extremely unlikely that we could obtain one as it would involve reducing the share of the Total Allowable Catch of those Member States that do have quota and for whom bluefin is an important commercial fishery. There would be no support from any quarter for any action by Ireland that might lead to an increase in bluefin mortality.

My Department has for some time been exploring if there may be a means of securing support at EU and ICCAT level for the introduction of a tag and release scientific scheme. In that context, we have been in correspondence with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR), which has responsibility for angling, and the EU Commission, with regard to the possibility of a tag and release fishing programme for Bluefin that would not impact mortality and would contribute to scientific knowledge. We have also requested that Department's views on the specific proposal received from the Irish Big Game Angling Association in this regard.

For there to be any possibility of such a tag and release programme, an agreement would first be required within the EU , and then an attempt could be made to change ICCAT rules that would permit a possible tag and release programme.

However, before any case could be made to the EU Commission, there are a number of legal and technical issues which will require further examination and clarification. For instance, a detailed technical analysis would be required of how such a possible tag and release scheme might work (possible scope of the scheme in terms of seasons and numbers, how fish are handled etc.). It would also be necessary to identify changes that would be required to ICCAT and EU Regulations. My Department will continue to liaise closely with DCENR and relevant stakeholders on this matter to consider who would be in a position to undertake such work, in the first instance.