14th STANDING COMMITTEE ON TUNA AND BILLFISH 9th – 16th AUGUST 2001 NOUMEA -----REPORT FROM NEW CALEDONIA

Year 2000 was a milestone in the development of the New Caledonia tuna fishery since a very important project undertaken by a new fishing company was successfully finalized : under this project 10 longliners will be based in the Northern Province of New Caledonia in 2001, four of them being already active.

By the end of this year almost 25 tuna vessels will so be registered and fish in the waters around New Caledonia.

It is worth noting, however, that there is no more large freezer longliner in the domestic fleet since the last vessel of this type stopped fishing late 2000 after several months of very low activity.

Thus, the New Caledonia tuna fleet is now only composed of fresh fish small longliners targeting for bigeye and yellowfin tuna to be exported to fresh sashimi markets.

A. Catch statistics

M. Tonnes (%)	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000 (*)
Yellowfin tuna	554 (39%)	466 (41%)	185 <i>(10%)</i>	373 (20%)	250 (13%)
Bigeye tuna	233 (16%)	234 (21%)	498 (28%)	553 <i>(30%)</i>	517 (26%)
Albacore	414 <i>(</i> 29%)	277 (24%)	860 (47%)	690 <i>(</i> 38%)	895 (45%)
Sharks	34 (2%)	20 (2%)	18 <i>(1%)</i>	21 (1%)	31 <i>(1%)</i>
Others	202 (14%)	134 <i>(12%)</i>	260 (14%)	206 (11%)	294 (15%)
TOTAL	1,437	1,131	1,821	1,843	1,987

Table 1 : Breakdown of catch (whole weights) from the New Caledonia longliners

(*) : preliminary figures

For several years bigeye has contributed to more than 25% of the total catch, in relation with the broad use of monofilament. However, albacore is still the major species, being caught throughout the year.

The catch statistics provided in table 1 are compiled from different sources of data, in particular customs statistics which do not allow to get detailed data on bycatch species.

Thus, with regard to billfish, breakdown of catch by species (table 2) can only be extracted from logsheets.

No. of fish (%)	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000 (*)
Striped marlin	499 (60%)	366 (57%)	1992 (57%)	1061 (38%)	480 (27%)
Blue marlin	50 (6%)	16 (3%)	134 (4%)	168 (6%)	290 (16%)
Black marlin	148 (18%)	140 (22%)	419 (12%)	438 (16%)	266 (15%)
Swordfish	74 (9%)	61 (9%)	384 (11%)	245 (9%)	202 (12%)
Sailfish	64 (7%)	9 (1%)	266 (8%)	518 (18%)	320 (18%)
Spearfish	0 (0%)	52 (8%)	287 (8%)	369 (13%)	203 (12%)
ALL BILLFISH	835	644	3482	2799	1761

 Table 2 : Breakdown of billfish catch (derived from logsheets)

(*): January to September only

Since no statistics are available yet for the last quarter of 2000 figures on that particular year are of low significance.

In 1999 less than 40% of the total billfish catch were composed of striped marlin which generally represents more than 50% of that fish category.

Table 3 : Seasonality of billfish catch (derived from logsheets: 1983 to 2000)

No. of fish per	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
100 hooks	quarter	quarter	quarter	quarter (*)
Striped marlin	0.024	0.027	0.044	0.163
Blue marlin	0.010	0.011	0.007	0.011
Black marlin	0.038	0.023	0.019	0.040
Swordfish	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.015
Sailfish	0.025	0.017	0.009	0.017
Spearfish	0.001	0.005	0.006	0.003
ALL BILLFISH	0.108	0.093	0.096	0.249

(*): 1983 to 1999 only

As indicated in table 3 above, striped marlin is abundant in the waters around New Caledonia in the 4th quarter of the year, best catch occurring from September to November.

Black marlin and blue marlin are not target species of the domestic longline fleet but are present throughout the year.

So is swordfish which however shows some seasonality of abundance: the highest CPUE are recorded in summer when this species could then be targeted.

Early this year, an observer spent ten days onboard a domestic fresh fish longiner targeting specifically bigeye. This trip allowed to get some information about the bycatch and discards from vessels of that kind in New Caledonia:

Table 4 : Bycatch and discards in the domestic longline fleet (from a trip observed)

	target species		bycatch		
percentage of the total catch (number of fish)	33%		67%		
	75% bigeye tuna	25% yellowfin tuna	49% sold locally	51 % rejected (5 % sharks)	

It should be noted that due to the area and depths fished during this trip the vessel caught less sharks than other boats of that kind.

A noticeable number of deepwater fish were also caught. It mainly consisted of lancet fish (*Alepiosaurus brevirostris*), estimated number of 10 fish per day, and oilfish (*Ruvettus pretiosus*), about 1 fish caught daily, for which the survival rates must be very low.

B. The domestic tuna longline fleet

Number of	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Longliners					
GRT less than	1	1	-	-	-
50 t.					
GRT from 51	5	6	10	12	13
to 200 t.					
GRT from 201	2	2	1	1	1
To 500 t.					
TOTAL	8	9	11	13	14

Table 5 : Number of tuna longliners active by gross registered tonnage (GRT)

As already stated above the large freezer vessel had a very low activity last year and stopped fishing late 2000. Therefore, only 13 longliners were actually active in the waters of New Caledonia last year.

Early 2001 four fresh fish boats originally from French Polynesia started fishing from a port in the Northern Province of New Caledonia. These vessels are from a series of ten longliners which are to be based in this port by end of the year.

So as to monitor the landings of this fleet port sampling was initiated as soon as the very first fishing campaigns took place.

C. The markets

It is likely that the fishing company from the Northern Province will endeavour to sell its fish on new markets but more tonnes of bycatch will have to be sold locally. However, there is an opportunity for initiating commercial links with Europe for some specific products (such as loins of albacore) which will therefore require necessary processing facilities to be built in New Caledonia.

To date the Japanese sashimi market has been the most interesting market for the New Caledonia tuna. However, recently, some sashimi-grade fish were successfully sold on the US mainland when direct flights existed between New Caledonia and California. Unfortunately, this airline ceased several months ago.

D. The future

In last year's country statement it was reported that French tuna purse-seiners endeavour to access to the fishing zones of certain countries from the western Pacific. Some progress toward this objective was made with one country, without however reaching a agreement on the access conditions. As these vessels intend to operate from the Northern Province of New Caledonia port facilities are already under construction there.

Since last year several projects about tuna fishing in the EEZ of New Caledonia were initiated, all with small longliners (average length of 20 meters). One of them also include the construction of processing facilities in Noumea which would be of great interest in the context of a developing fleet.

All these projects have led the government of New Caledonia to prepare a new fishing policy to better control the exploitation of the fish resources of its EEZ.

The first step will be to impose a license to every vessel fishing in these waters. Then measures such as catch and fishing effort limitation might be adopted.

In the context of the establishment of the Western and Central Pacific Fish Commission, it is assumed that the new local policy will include some of the provisions of the convention adopted in Hawaii last year.