



# International Game Fish Association

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Testimony before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries,  
Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs, on H.R. 2706, “the Billfish Conservation Act of 2011”  
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Good afternoon Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee, and thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you about H.R. 2706, the *Billfish Conservation Act of 2011*, the status of billfish populations and how the United States can take a leadership role in improving their conservation for the benefit of U.S. fishermen and the U.S. economy.

My name is Jason Schratwieser and I am the Conservation Director for the International Game Fish Association. The IGFA is a non-profit organization founded in 1939 that represents recreational anglers throughout the world. IGFA has active members in over 100 countries, is the governing body for international recreational fishing, and provides rules for ethical angling practices. Since its inception, our organization has taken an active, global role in fisheries research and conservation. The core of our membership is thousands of offshore anglers who catch and release billfish and are very supportive of H.R. 2706.

Marlin, sailfish and spearfish, collectively termed “billfish”, are open-ocean apex predators that can be, in many ways, compared to lions, bears and tigers on land. I would like to point out that swordfish are not considered billfish by U.S. fisheries managers and are not included in this bill. Like their terrestrial counterparts, billfish are far less abundant than the prey species they feed on and they play a critical role in keeping the natural balance in their respective ecosystems.

Besides having an important ecological role in the wild, billfish support vibrant recreational catch and release fisheries that yield significant economic benefits both in the United States and abroad. A study published in 2003 found that U.S. billfish anglers spend more than many other anglers. Direct and indirect expenditures for billfishing total more than \$204 million annually for the Atlantic seaboard alone.

On the east coast of the U.S., the National Marine Fisheries Service issued permits for more than 175 billfish tournaments in 2011. These tournaments bring in millions of dollars to local economies through hotel and restaurant sales and taxes, fishing charters, registration fees, fuel sales, and tourist attractions. Tournaments are held every year in Louisiana, New Jersey, Virginia, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Texas, Massachusetts, California and Florida—to name a few places. In the Pacific, Hawaii hosts several of the largest, most lucrative tournaments in the world, generating several million dollars locally during a single tournament.

Though billfish are typically not a target species in most commercial fisheries, they are frequently caught as bycatch in longline and purse seine gear intended for tuna and swordfish. The United States carefully regulates billfish harvest in its domestic fisheries and has prohibited the commercial harvest and sale of Atlantic billfish for over two decades. Most billfish caught by recreational anglers are released and the entire Atlantic recreational fishery is limited to an annual harvest of only 250 marlin.



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Commercial anglers are also prohibited from possessing striped marlin on the west coast of the continental U.S. In the Pacific, U.S. commercial fisheries primarily interact with billfish in Hawaii and adjacent island territories. Here billfish are managed through the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council according to the standards set by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Unfortunately, billfish are not managed well, if at all, elsewhere. In 2011, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature published the first-ever global assessment of all billfish species, Atlantic and Pacific. Their report found that blue and white marlin met criteria to list them as vulnerable to extinction and striped marlin were considered to be near threatened with extinction. I want to emphasize that billfish are a highly migratory species, and IGFA tagging initiatives have shown that they are capable of traveling over 4,700 miles in 120 days. This means billfish being harvested and sold to the U.S. by foreign countries are, in essence, our fish too.

Even though the United States manages the domestic harvest of billfish reasonably well, we are still a big part of the global problem. In 2007, the IGFA commissioned a study to evaluate international billfish harvest and trade. The results of this study found the United States is the world's largest importer of billfish. The top five biggest exporters to the United States by rank are Costa Rica, Ecuador, Vietnam, South Korea and the Philippines. According to the FDA, this totals some 1,335 metric tons annually or approximately 30,000 fish.

The excessive harvest and export of billfish from foreign countries, especially those in Central America, have very real, negative impacts to not only our domestic fisheries but also to U.S. anglers who spend money on tackle and airfare domestically to travel and fish for billfish in other countries. The IGFA report on billfish trade also found that the legal sale of Pacific-caught billfish creates a black market which allows Atlantic-caught billfish to enter the United States. Thus, it is clear that importation from foreign countries is the problem, but it is something that cannot be fixed within our domestic fishery management council process.

H.R. 2706 will ban the sale of billfish in the continental U.S. and would thus halt importation of billfish from foreign countries. This will eliminate a sizable market for exporting countries and will close the black market for Atlantic billfish. It will also strengthen the United States' position to enact better international measures to conserve billfish in the Pacific. The U.S. is a big player in Pacific regional fisheries management organizations that manage highly migratory species, such as the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission. The U.S. delegations will be far better positioned to seek improved billfish conservation in other nations when we are no longer importing more of these fish than other countries. We simply cannot hope to influence change in other countries until we create this change within our own.

I would also like to speak to the consequences for U.S. consumers or commercial anglers. Studies have shown seafood is a highly elastic commodity that is easily substituted for other goods. In general, billfish is a niche product here in the U.S. and much of it is sold in processed form so that banning imports would merely cause consumers to shift to any number of other readily available species of fish.



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The only U.S. commercial fishery for billfish occurs in Hawaii and adjacent Pacific Insular Areas. This bill expressly carves out this region and would allow the continued harvest and sale of billfish within these areas, where billfish are subject to the conservation rules set out in the Magnuson Act.

In summary, billfish populations are in decline globally. The highly migratory nature of these fish means that strong international conservation measures are critical to their survival. Passing H.R. 2706 would make the United States part of the solution by effectively ending the importation of billfish from foreign countries and strengthening the U.S. position to sanction enhanced protection for these nomadic fish.

This would directly benefit U.S. recreational anglers who already spend considerable sums of money on boat, tackle, fuel, tournaments, etc. both here and abroad. H.R. 2706 will have virtually no impact on U.S. consumers and will still allow the traditional harvest and trade of billfish in Hawaii and neighboring Pacific Insular Areas.

Recreational fishing for billfish was started by U.S. anglers and is truly an American tradition. So is billfish conservation. The International Game Fish Association and its members strongly urge the passage of the *Billfish Conservation Act of 2011*.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak on this very important subject and I will be pleased to answer any questions you might have.