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Lawmakers Send Governor Brown Bill to End Drift Gillnets

California bill will enhance marine biodiversity and foster use of innovative fishing gear

Sacramento, CA. – The California legislature voted overwhelmingly in favor of a Bill to end commercial drift gillnet fishing and sent it to Governor Jerry Brown’s desk for his signature. Senate Bill (SB) 1017 phases out the use of mile-long nets that drift in the open ocean, compensates drift gillnet fishermen, and encourages a transition to innovative new swordfishing gear.

Wild Oceans, the International Game Fish Association, Coastal Conservation Association of California and American Sportfishing Association applauded Senator Ben Allen (D-Santa Monica) for introducing the legislation. They have been working together to promote a transition away from drift nets to safer, more selective fishing methods for swordfish, tuna and other commercial species.

“This bill acknowledges that it’s time to leave outmoded gears behind and foster small scale, high yield, low bycatch fisheries to catch swordfish,” said Ken Hinman, President of Wild Oceans.

The drift gillnet fishery sets nearly-invisible nets, fifty yards deep and up to a mile long. The nets drift freely overnight in the ocean and catch valuable swordfish. But, drift gillnets also ensnare 70 other species of ocean wildlife. The results in half of the catch being discarded as unwanted, prohibited or protected species. Recognizing the indiscriminate nature of drift nets, the United Nations banned large-scale drift nets on the high seas twenty years ago. The U.S. prohibits drift nets of any size in the east coast fisheries and the European Union disallowed drift netting among its 27 member states in 2002. “Ending drift gill nets will enhance marine biodiversity and recreational fishing opportunities,” said Bob Kurz, a Trustee for the International Game Fish Association.

If Governor Brown signs SB 1017 into law, the state will develop a drift gillnet transition program seeded with private and public funds. Once established, California will phase out the use of drift gillnet fishing over a four year period and

compensate fishermen a fair market value for their permits. Fishermen will be required to surrender their nets to ensure the gear is not used elsewhere.

“I am proud to co-author SB 1017 and support a reform in California’s ocean fishery practices. This private-public partnership is a thoughtful balance of supporting California swordfish commerce and a transition to smarter fishing practices,” said Assemblyman William Brough (R – Dana Point).

One such emerging fishing method is the use of buoy-gear, which fishermen in Florida have used for over a decade to supply a high-value product with virtually no bycatch. Off California, researchers and fishermen have modified buoy-gear to fish deep, during the day. More than 80 percent of the hookups are swordfish and only 2 percent is bycatch. Dozens of drift gillnet swordfish fishermen have applied for permits to use a modified version called deep-set buoy gear. “The growing deep-set buoy gear fishery may in turn revive our historic southern California harpoon fishery, an efficient, no bycatch gear. Working in tandem we expect both fisheries to provide more, higher quality, local swordfish to Californians,” said Bill Shedd, President of Coastal Conservation Association of California.

SB 1017 passed the senate (31-2) and the assembly (78-0) with bipartisan support from the following co-authors: Senator Bob Wieckowski (D- Fremont) and Assemblymembers Richard Bloom (D- Santa Monica), William Brough (R-Dana Point) Wendy Carrillo (D- Los Angeles), David Chiu (D- San Francisco), Kansen Chu (D- San Jose), Laura Friedman (D-Glendale), Todd Gloria (D-San Diego), Ash Kalra (D- San Jose), Marc Levine (D- Marin County), Brian Maienschein (R-San Diego), Al Muratsuchi (D- Torrance), Bill Quirk (D-Hayward), Mark Stone (D- Scotts Valley), and Marie Waldron (R- Escondido).

“We are extremely grateful to Senator Allen for leading this bi-partisan effort that garnered the support of sportfishermen, coastal businesses, ocean conservationists, turtle conservationist and animal rights activists to transition the California swordfish fishery for the benefit of all those who care about and depend on healthy marine resources,” said Mike Leonard, the American Sportfishing Association’s Conservation Director.

The Governor has a September 30 deadline to sign this bill into law.