



Press Release

Contact Paul Dalzell or Eric Kingma: (808) 522-8220
Paul.Dalzell@noaa.gov or Eric.Kingma@noaa.gov

U.S. Territories Ask for “Justice” in Pacific Tuna Allocations

HONOLULU (23 October 2009) The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council today concluded its four-day meeting at the Laniakea YWCA-Fuller Hall in Honolulu. The Council was established by Congress to manage fisheries in the offshore waters of Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and other US Pacific island areas. Recommendations made by the Council are transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for final approval.

A major discussion item the past two days has been an amendment to the Pelagic Fishery Management Plan (FMP) that would authorize American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) to utilize their Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission (WCPFC) longline bigeye tuna catch limits through arrangements with U.S. vessels permitted through the Pelagic FMP. The primary objective of this amendment is to stimulate fisheries development in the U.S. territories.

Council member Manuel Duenas of Guam and others noted that the U.S. longline vessels permitted under the Pelagic FMP, with whom the Territories would be able to enter into arrangement, are the most highly regulated and closely monitored fishing vessels in the world.

Hawaii Council members Peter Young and Laura Thielen, chair of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, argued against the amendment.

Bill Robinson, regional administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Regional Office, noted that the United States accounts for only 3 to 4 percent of Pacific longline fishery and that is the reason bigeye overfishing measures are being promulgated internationally through the WCPFC in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. The total harvest of bigeye by Pacific longline fleets is about 120,000 metric tons.

The WCPFC, which manages tunas and other highly migratory species in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, addressed the overfishing issue by setting national quotas for longline fisheries and non-quota measures for the purse seine fleets. Under the international measures of the WCPFC, to which the Hawaii longline fleet is subject, each U.S. Pacific island territory has an annual longline bigeye limit of 2,000 metric tons or no limit if they are undertaking effective, responsible fisheries development. The United States, as a member of the WCPFC, agreed to this measure last year.

Council member David Itano, a researcher with the University of Hawaii’s Pelagic Fisheries Research Program, noted that the biggest impact to the bigeye stock is occurring in the waters around the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Federated States of Micronesia.

The latter two countries are members of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), a Pacific Islands regional organization that gives fishing access rights to the U.S. purse seine fleet through the

---more---

U.S. Territories Ask for Tuna Justice 2-2-2-2-2

South Pacific Tuna Treaty (SPTT). The U.S. government annually pays \$18 million to the FFA so U.S. purse seine vessels can operate in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters of the FFA countries.

The longline vessels target adult bigeye for the lucrative sashimi and fresh fish market. The purse seine vessels catch juvenile bigeye and yellowfin tuna incidentally while targeting skipjack tuna for the canned tuna industry. The overfishing status of bigeye has been spurred by increased catches of bigeye by the purse seiners due to more frequent use of fish aggregation devices (FADs), which attract juvenile tunas and hundreds of bycatch species. The United States has the largest purse seine fleet in the region and is largest user of FADs. The U.S. purse seine fleet increased its size recently through partnership agreements with Taiwan and Korea, which have up to 49 percent ownership of U.S. flagged purse seine vessels. These U.S. purse seine vessels are managed by NMFS (and not through the Council process) and have their SPTT fishery access rights negotiated by the U.S. Department of State. The State Department also represents the United States at the WCPFC and is one of the 16 members of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, but typically attends only one of the three regular Council meetings annually.

“Where is the justice?” asked Council member Duenas. The 39 U.S. flagged, government-subsidized purse seiners harvest 6,500-8,000 metric tons of Pacific bigeye annually and have no WCPFC quota, while the 130 permitted U.S. longliners based in Hawaii, plus one on the West Coast, have a WCPFC quota of 3,763 metric tons of bigeye. The U.S. longline quota represents a 10 percent reduction of the 2004 harvest by the Hawaii longline fleet. The Hawaii fleet is expected to reach the 2009 WCPFC quota in December, just when the demand of holiday sashimi peaks in Hawaii.

After long discussions, the Council—with the exception of Young and Thielen—agreed to amend the Pelagics FMP to establish an annual longline bigeye catch limit of 2,000 mt for each of the U.S. Pacific island territories and provide them with limited authority to utilize their longline bigeye catch limits through arrangements (charter, lease or similar mechanisms) with Pelagic FMP permitted vessels. The vessels in the charter arrangement would have to provide benefits to the Territories to promote responsible fisheries development, consistent with the Territory’s Marine Conservation Plan, such as funding, infrastructure development, training and employment.

The Council also voted to recommend that NMFS develop and implement a FAD management plan that will effectively reduce juvenile bigeye catch by the U.S. purse seine fleet in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean.

In other business, the Council appointed the following as its 2010 officers: Stephen Haleck of American Samoa as Council chair, David Itano as vice chair for Hawaii, William Sword as vice chair for CNMI, and Manuel Duenas as vice chair for Guam.

---more---

For more information on the above items and/or the meeting agenda, please go to www.wpcouncil.org/meetings or contact the Council by phone (808) 522-8220, fax (808) 522-8226 (fax), or email info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov.

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council Members

Designated state officials: Ignacio Dela Cruz, CNMI Department of Land and Natural Resources; Joe Torres, Guam Department of Agriculture; Laura Thielen, Hawaii Department of Land & Natural Resources; and Ray Tulafono, American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources. Designated federal officials: Bill Robinson, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office; Jerry Leinecke, U.S. Fish and Wildlife; RAdm Manson K. Brown, District Commander, U.S. Coast Guard 14th District; and Bill Gibbons-Fly, U.S. Department of State. Appointees by the Secretary of Commerce from nominees selected by Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa and CNMI governors: William Sword, recreational fisherman/civil engineer/manager (American Samoa); Stephen Haleck, business owner (hotel and gas station) (American Samoa) (Vice Chair); Manuel Duenas, Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association (Guam) (Vice Chair); Frederick Duerr, resort and hotel consultant (Hawaii) (Vice Chair); Peter Young, environmental consultant (Hawaii); David Itano, researcher (Hawaii); Sean Martin, Pacific Ocean Producers (Hawaii) (Chair); and Benigno Sablan, cultural practitioner (CNMI) (Vice Chair).