



Council Recommends Stricter Bigeye Tuna Measures for Purse Seiners, Expedited Assessment of Hawaii False Killer Whales, Hawaii Recreational Bottomfish Deferral

HONOLULU (15 October 2010) The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council concluded its three-day meeting in Honolulu yesterday with recommendations regarding federal management of US Pacific Island pelagic fisheries and marine protected species as well as program planning and administrative matters.

To address the overfishing status of Pacific bigeye tuna, the Council reiterated its June 2010 recommendations that stricter measures should be applied to the catch of the species by purse-seine vessels. Pacific bigeye tuna are managed internationally by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC). The Council recommended that the United States, which is party to the WCPFC, transmit draft management proposals to the Commission for consideration prior to its Dec. 6 to 10, 2010, meeting in Hawaii that would establish bigeye tuna catch limits for purse seiners, mandatory port sampling, effective fish aggregation device (FAD) fishing closures, evaluation of the use of a vessel day scheme for bigeye conservation, rolling three-year catch limits for longline fisheries and mandatory gear marking for all for fishing vessels in the WCPFC convention area.

Although not its target species, the US purse seine fleet catches twice as much bigeye tuna as the Hawaii longline fleet. The overfishing of bigeye tuna coincides with the increasing use of FADs by US and other purse-seiners, which target skipjack tuna to be canned. The purse-seine FADs also attract juvenile bigeye and yellowfin tuna, species that are targeted in their adult stage by longliners, including the Hawaii-based fleet, for the fresh fish and sashimi markets.

The Council also recommended that the United States request that the WCPFC evaluate the use of catch limits for pelagic fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. A similar study is being conducted by the IATTC for the Eastern Pacific Ocean. The WCPFC bigeye tuna catch limit for the US longline fleet, which consists of the Hawaii fleet plus one vessel operating out of the West Coast, is 3,763 mt annually through 2011. In 2009, the Hawaii quota was reached at the end of December. This year it is expected to be reached in mid-November.

In addition to the catch limit, the Hawaii deep-set longline fleet targeting tuna may be facing more closed areas around Hawaii as well as a suite of additional mandatory gear requirements to address protection of false killer whales. The false killer whales are currently not listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) nor are they designated as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). There are two stocks of Hawaii false killer whales, the pelagic stock and the insular stock. They visually look the same, but have genetic differences.

Under the standards established by the MMPA, the estimated level of false killer whale mortalities and interactions with the Hawaii longline fleet are too high. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) assembled a team to develop a plan to reduce hooking and entanglement of false killer whales by the fishery. The plan contains several elements such as captain and crew training to safely release captured false killer whales and a series of fishery time-area closures that are linked in size and duration with the level of interactions.

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Stricter Purse Seine Measures Recommended 2-2-2-2

The contents of the plan were based on previous estimates of the false killer whale population size. Elements such as time-area closures may potentially have negative impacts to the Hawaii longline fishery. However, a recent cetacean stock assessment cruise by NMFS suggests that the population of false killer whales may be greater than previously thought. As such the Council recommended that NMFS expedite the analysis of the cruise data and include the updated population estimates in the draft 2011 Stock Assessment Report.

The Council also expressed concern about the Biological Review Team that is determining whether the Hawaii insular false killer whales are a distinct population segment under the ESA definition and evaluating its risk of becoming extinct. The Council recommended that the draft plan be independently reviewed by the Center for Independent Experts, an institution established by NMFS for independent reviews of its science. Among the report conclusions that the Council wants to see subjected to this review are assumptions about reduced prey and competition from pelagic fisheries (including troll, handline, kaka and longline), genetic information and absence of population parameters to assess trends of the Hawaiian insular false killer whale populations.

Other Council actions yesterday included the following, among others:

- Modify the American Samoa large pelagic fishing vessel area closure to minimize incongruence with the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument (MNM) while returning available fishing area to the longline fleet that was lost due to the establishment of incongruent boundaries of the Rose Atoll MNM with the Council's large vessel prohibited area. The preliminary preferred alternative would maintain protection of the various banks and seamounts important for the American Samoa troll and sports fisheries and temporarily reduce the large pelagic vessel area closure around Swains Island to 25 nautical miles. The Council is expected to take final action on this measure in March 2011 in American Samoa.
- Request that NMFS provide a deferral to the federal non-commercial bottomfish fishery permit holders from the National Saltwater angler Registry's upcoming fee until such time that an amendment to the Registry's rule can provide an exemption. The Registry fee, which will be required of recreational fishermen in States that do not have a federal exemption to the rule, is scheduled to start in 2011.

The Council also approved a process for establishing annual catch limits and elected as its officers for 2011: Manuel Duenas as Council chair, Stephen Haleck as vice chair for American Samoa, David Itano as vice chair for Hawaii, Ben Sablan as vice chair for CNMI and the Guam Governor's representative as vice chair for Guam.

Additional information on the Council meeting and the major agenda items may be found at the Council's website at www.wpcouncil.org. Information may also be requested by contacting the Council by phone (808) 522-8220, fax (808) 522-8226 (fax) or email info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov.