

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

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WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL TAKES FINAL ACTION ON FOUR MAJOR ISSUES AT IT'S 97th COUNCIL MEETING IN KAILUA KONA, 14-16 APRIL 1998

KAILUA KONA, HAWAII -- The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Council) approved actions to 1) establish an area closure around American Samoa that excludes large pelagic fishing vessels; 2) establish a limited access system for the bottomfish fishery in the Mau Zone of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI); 3) request the Secretary of Commerce to delist main Hawaiian Island (MHI) onaga and ehu (and stressed hapuupuu) from the overfished category, based on the best available information; and 4) amend the Council's fishery management plans to comply with new provisions in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

The area closure in the EEZ around American Samoa will prohibit fishing vessels over 50 ft in length from fishing for pelagic fish within 50 nautical miles of the islands of American Samoa, except Swain's Island, which will have a 30 nm area closure. Exemptions will be granted to vessels larger than 50 ft which received Federal longline permits prior to November 13, 1997. The measure is intended to protect and promote the local small boat fishery which holds considerable economic and cultural importance for American Samoa residents.

The limited access system for the Mau Zone, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, addresses potential overfishing and low economic returns in the bottomfish fishery. The amendment sets the long range target number of active vessels in the fishery at 10. Twenty percent of the target number of Mau Zone permits (2) will be reserved for eligible communities participating in a western Pacific Community Development Program.

In 1997, NMFS included MHI onaga and ehu on a national listing of overfished stocks in the U.S.A. The best available scientific data strongly suggest that onaga and ehu stocks in Hawaii range archipelago-wide. Their listing as being overfished in the MHI is, therefore, not indicative of biological overfishing, but rather localized depletion. Considered as archipelagic-wide stocks, neither species falls below the threshold that defines recruitment overfishing. Genetic research to further substantiate this hypothesis continues, while the Council must respond by September.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires the Council to comply with new provisions regarding overfishing, MSY, bycatch, fishing communities, fishing sectors and essential fish habitat. The Council approved the final draft of an amendment which addresses the M-S Act requirements by amending the Council's fishery management plans for pelagic species, bottomfish, precious corals and crustaceans. By identifying habitat essential for

spawning, feeding, and growth to maturity, the Council has adopted a broad ecosystem-based management approach that will help protect the habitat necessary to ensure the long-term productivity of the fisheries of the western Pacific region.

Highlights of other actions and discussion taken by the Council include:

Pelagics. The Council endorsed Pelagic Plan Team and Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommendations which suggest that a new stock assessment is required for marlins, especially the blue marlin. This would be followed by an international billfish symposium, which will focus on marlin population dynamics and stock assessment. These recommendations were the outcome of discussions on possible interaction effects between Hawaii-based longline vessels and charter vessels operating from the Kona area.

On a related topic, the Council cosponsored the Pacific Islands Gamefish Tournaments Symposium (which followed the Council meeting) organized by the Pacific Ocean Research Foundation. The theme of the symposium was, *Facing the Challenges of Resource Conservation Sustainable Development, and the Sportfishing Ethic.* It was attended by over 40 participants from around the Pacific, including academics, fisheries scientists, fishermen, and fishery managers, and the proceedings of this first of its kind Symposium will be available in 1999. One of the most interesting outcomes of the Symposium was the fundamental difference in perspective between gamefish fishermen and Pacific Islands fishermen in their attitude towards catch. The idea that a fish may be caught purely for sport, then tagged and released is anathema to Pacific Islanders, who eat what they catch, and do not play with their food.

The Council endorsed Pelagic Plan Team and SSC recommendations on sharks, which included more information on how sharks are actually finned at sea and on the Council and NMFS project to estimate the value of shark finning to the American flag islands in the Pacific Region. This project, will commence in the fall and will be expanded to encompass the entire Western Pacific.

The Council reviewed the status of its two projects stemming from interactions between the Hawaii longline fishery and albatrosses nesting in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The contractor, Garcia and Associates, will begin field work on longline vessels in August to test various mitigation devices under actual fishing conditions. The contractor for the workshop on the population dynamics of Blackfooted albatross reported that a database of bird banding information will be released to participants in August. The workshop will run from October 8-10, and be convened at the Council offices in Honolulu.

Bottomfish. The Council recommended that the genetic research on onaga and ehu stock range continue, and that hapuupuu be similarly considered. It further recommended that staff prepare the necessary background documentation for the Council to take action to delegate authority to the State to manage bottomfish in the federal EEZ of the MHI, to help address the localized depletion problem. Recommendations from the 1997 Bottomfish Annual Report were also approved.

Crustaceans. The Council acted to finalize the framework regulatory measure to continue partial bank-specific allocation of the harvest guideline in the NWHI lobster fishery. The 1998 season allocations were determined for Maro Reef, Necker Island and Gardner Pinnacles thereby distributing fishing effort to other banks. The Council recommended that NMFS provide results of the current NWHI lobster fishing season together with the methodology used to establish the harvest guideline to its SSC in a timely manner.

Ecosystem and Habitat. Plan Team members for the new Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan will meet in September to discuss development strategies and research and data needs for the new FMP.

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council is made up of 16 members representing American Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, the Northern Mariana Islands and various federal agencies, including the Fish & Wildlife Service, the Coast Guard, and the State Department. The Council Chairman is James Cook from Hawaii. Vice Chairs are Paul Stevenson from American Samoa, Judith Guthertz from Guam, Frank Farm from Hawaii, and Arnold Palacios from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

The Council, established in 1977, is one of eight regional fishery management councils authorized by the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. The Western Pacific Fishery Council's jurisdiction includes all waters within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In general, the Council's EEZ includes all waters from three to 200 miles offshore around American Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, the Northern Mariana Islands, and a number of American-flag islands in the Pacific.