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Sharks, Birds, Coral Reefs Dominate Fishery Management Decisions

HONOLULU Fishery management is about more than just fish and fishers as evidenced by the decisions made by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, during a four-day meeting, which concluded Friday at the Ala Moana Hotel. The Council initialized moves to restrict shark fishing, reduce interactions between longline vessels and seabirds and manage coral reef ecosystems in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Western Pacific Region, waters 3200 miles off Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. remote Pacific Islands.

The Council agreed to include bottom longline gear under the existing definition of Alongline and to examine other measures to regulate the gear. Currently, the gear is not generally used in the Western Pacific EEZ but is being used to catch mostly coastal sharks near the main Hawaiian Islands. The Council also directed its staff to work with the Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources to formulate complementary state and federal regulations for all types of shark fishing gear for waters adjacent to the main Hawaiian Islands currently closed to longline gear. The longline gear closure encompasses waters out to 2575 miles offshore, depending on the area and the season. The Council is expected to make a decision on these regulations in October.

The Council will consider additional regulations on sharks in early 2000. Possible regulations include requiring full utilization of blue shark, a moratorium on the harvest of shark by any gear type, quotas on the harvest of shark, trip limits on the retention of sharks and/or limits on the harvests of certain species of sharks. Such regulations would address the concern by some that retaining only the fins of sharks is wasteful and culturally offensive to those Native Hawaiians who consider sharks to be

family gods. Blue shark makes up about 90 to 95 percent of the approximately 100,000 sharks caught annually by Hawaii-based longline vessels, which target swordfish and tuna. About 60,000 sharks are retained. The blue shark population is healthy, and currently, only the fins of the species have a market value.

The Council requested that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) place top priority on projects investigating other potential utilization of blue shark and that an in-depth study of the cultural aspects of sharks and shark fishing in the Hawaiian Islands, the Marianas archipelago and American Samoa be conducted. The cultural report is expected to be completed by the end of the calendar year. It is hoped that greater utilization of blue shark can be achieved by 2001, when the U.S. National Plan of Action for Management of Shark Fisheries is to be completed.

Initial action was also taken by the Council to require longline vessels fishing above 23°N or 25°N latitude to comply with some combination of measures to reduce interactions between albatross and longline gear. Approximately 3,000 albatross are estimated to drown annually when attempting to take bait from lines being set by longline vessels, particularly those targeting swordfish. Among the measures considered as preferred alternatives are using only completely thawed, blue-dyed bait; towing an approved deterrent while setting and hauling lines; deploying lines with a Ashooter® that sets the line faster than the vessels speed; and setting lines after sunset and before sunrise, using minimal vessel lighting. The Council may also require that reasonable effort is made to release birds alive, hooks are removed from birds without jeopardizing their life and vessel captains participate in an annual protected species educational workshop conducted by NMFS. A final decision on these regulations is expected at the next Council meeting in October.

Action was also taken by the Council to endorse a [Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan](#), which includes permit and reporting requirements for non-subsistence harvest of coral reef resources, designated marine protected area, allowable harvest gear, prohibition of gear usage destructive to habitat and a process for future management options. Future options may prohibit large vessels from anchoring on Guam's southern banks, require fishing vessels to moor at designated zones, require a permit for live rock aquaculture and require permanent markings on passive fishing gear, such as gill nets and fish traps. The Council will also look into banning the possession or collection of Alive rock® and coral (except for precious corals, such as black and gold coral, which are already managed by the

Council) for commercial purposes. Exceptions may be made by permit for scientific and research purposes and for brood-stock for captive breeding/aquaculture.

The Council took final action aimed at closing loopholes in catch reporting requirements. The decision will require all troll and handline vessels harvesting pelagic species in the EEZ surrounding Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef and Palmyra, Jarvis, Howland, Baker and Wake Islands to have a federal permit and submit a federal logbook. Currently, only longline and purse-seine vessels in these waters are reporting their catches. The Council and NMFS will work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to provide for the exchange of catch data from the charter boat and recreational fisheries at Midway Island. Closing these loopholes will enhance fishery management decision-making and provide a historical basis to argue for tuna allocations, which are to be set for the western and central Pacific by an international commission in the near future.

The following are among many other management recommendations acted on by the Council:

- Initiate efforts to amend the Endangered Species Act so that a take of green sea turtles for cultural purposes is permitted in Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.
- Immediately undertake an in-depth economic impact analysis of recreational fisheries in the Western Pacific Region.
- Request NMFS simulate the effectiveness and fishery impacts of using an isotherm-based area closure as a means of reducing turtle bycatch.
- Convene an interagency working group to review the State of Hawaii's [main Hawaiian Islands bottomfish management plan](#) and identify ways in which the Council can provide greater federal support.
- Prohibit the harvest of [black coral](#) in the Western Pacific EEZ unless it has attained a minimum height of 48 inches or a stem diameter of 1 inch, measured from the base.

For information on additional action taken by the Council, phone (808) 522-8220.

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