



PRESS RELEASE

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Council Recommends Closed Area, Limited Entry Fishery in American Samoa EEZ

A management measure to close the nearshore waters of the American Samoa exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to large fishing vessels is moving forward after a three-year impasse.

Ray Tulafono, director of the American Samoa Marine and Wildlife Resources Department, said the territory initially proposed a closure 30 miles around Swain's Island and 50 miles around all other islands. A year later, local fishermen asked that the closure be expanded to 100 miles around all the islands,

Rod McInnis, regional administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southwest Region (SWR), said a 100-mile closure would probably not be accepted by the Secretary of Commerce. Following discussions held during the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting on Maui this week, the two parties agreed to the following regime:

- institute a 50-mile closure around all islands for vessels larger than 50 feet; and
- establish a limited entry program, with a control date of July 15, 2000, for vessels fishing 50 to 200 miles from shore around American Samoa.

Local fishermen and fishery managers alike are concerned about increasing fishery restrictions and closures in the United States that could send American fishermen seeking new fishing grounds. If they decide to head for American Samoa, the impact could be devastating. Maintenance of traditional social structure depends on customary traditions (*Fa'a Samoa*) that include the exchange of fish. However, recent catch by the American Samoa longline fleet has decreased while fleet size of nearby Samoa (formerly Western Samoa) has skyrocketed from about 10 in 1990 to nearly 250 in 1998. Additionally, American Samoa's longline vessels are typically small aluminum catamarans of about 30 feet that cannot venture far from shore.

The Western Pacific Council adopted the recommendation after consultations between NMFS SWR and American Samoa representatives. It will forward the management measure to establish the area closure to the Secretary this month for approval and will begin developing an amendment to the Pelagics FMP to establish the limited entry program.

Another hurdle cleared by the Council today was an updated assessment of the North Pacific blue shark population. According to the draft report presented by NMFS, the population is either recovering or fully recovered following an international ban on squid net fishing in the high seas in 1992. The Hawaii longline fleet catches approximately 100,000 blue sharks annually. Since 1991, the fleet has increasingly retained the sharks for their fins. Earlier this year the Council forwarded for Secretarial approval a Pelagics FMP amendment that would establish, as a precautionary measure, a harvest guideline for the fleet of 50,000 blues sharks. The guideline would be adjusted based on updated stock assessments and other indicators of the stock's health. The NMFS assessment indicates the guideline poses no threat to the stock.