

Briefing Document for Public Scoping Hearings



Scoping Hearings for Bottomfish, Seamount Groundfish and Crustacean Fisheries Environmental Impact Statements

The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is preparing environmental impact statements (EIS) on the Federal management of the fisheries for bottomfish and seamount groundfish and crustacean species in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) waters of the Western Pacific Region. The EIS analysis includes all activities as authorized under the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish and Crustaceans Fishery Management Plans and all amendments thereto. The scope of the EIS analysis examines the impacts of bottomfish, seamount groundfish and crustacean harvest on, among other things, protected species. To provide for public input into the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts that the EIS should consider, the Council is scheduling a series of scoping hearings throughout the region.

Scoping for the bottomfish EIS began in July 1999 with hearings held in Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa. Additional scoping hearings are scheduled to be held throughout the Council's jurisdiction including: the Hawaii Islands of Oahu, Maui, Hawaii, Lanai, Molokai and Kauai and in American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands (see attached flyer for specific times and locations). In addition to holding the scoping hearings, the Council will also accept written comments on the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts considered in the EIS.

The EIS, when completed, will present an overall picture of the environmental effects of fishing as conducted under the FMPs. It will also include a range of reasonable management alternatives and an analysis of their impacts in order to define issues and provide clear basis for choice among options by the public and the Council. The analysis will include an assessment of the biological and socio-economic impacts that result from regulation of the bottomfish, seamount groundfish and crustacean fisheries of the Western Pacific Region, including license limitation, present and potential controls on effort, harvest levels, location, timing, and methods of fishing. The effects on associated species, including interactions with protected species, will be assessed. Impacts associated with status quo management (i.e., continuation of fishing as currently conducted) will be presented and compared to situations simulating limits on fishing areas and/or gears over all or parts of the management area. Possible alternatives to the current conduct of the fishery include limited access and area and/or seasonal closures modifications, gear restrictions and/or modifications, and requirements for documenting incidental interactions with protected species. As there are an infinite number of alternatives, the EIS will not consider detailed alternatives for every aspect of the FMP. Therefore, the principal objective of the scoping and public input process is to identify a reasonable set of management alternatives that,

with adequate analysis, will clearly define critical issues and provide a basis for choice among the alternatives.

Other issues that the EIS will address include: essential fish habitat (EFH), target and non-target species of fish, fish that are discarded, marine mammals (Hawaiian monk seals and cetaceans), and other protected species present in the Western Pacific ecosystem. In addition, the EIS will summarize, interpret and contain predictions for socio-economic issues associated with conduct of the fishery on the following groups of individuals: (1) Those who participate in harvesting the fishery resources and other living marine resources, (2) those who process and market the fish and fishery products, (3) those who are involved in allied support industries, (4) those who consume fishery products, (5) those who rely on living marine resources in the management area either for subsistence needs or for recreational benefits, (6) those who benefit from non-consumptive uses of living marine resources, (7) those involved in managing and monitoring fisheries, and (8) fishing communities.

Summary of Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish & Crustaceans FMPs:

The Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish and Crustacean Fishery Management Plans and their amendments are summarized below. Most of the Council's activities in managing these fisheries have focused on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands where the majority of the commercial harvest for these species take place (see figure 1).

Bottomfish fishery

The Council established a fishery management plan (FMP) for bottomfish and seamount groundfish fisheries in the western Pacific region in 1986. The initial FMP prohibited certain destructive fishing techniques, including explosives, poisons, trawl nets and bottom-set gillnets; established a moratorium on the commercial harvest of seamount groundfish stocks at the Hancock Seamounts; and implemented a permit system for fishing for bottomfish in the EEZ around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). The plan also established a management framework that includes mechanisms for adjustments such as catch limits, size limits, area or seasonal closures, fishing effort limitation, fishing gear restrictions, access limitation, permit and/or catch reporting requirements and a rules-related notice system. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 1 established control dates for future limited access systems for bottomfish fisheries in the EEZ surrounding American Samoa and Guam within the framework measures of the FMP. No EA was prepared.

Amendment 2 was developed to diminish the risk of biological overfishing and improve the economic health and stability of the bottomfish fishery in the NWHI. The amendment divided the EEZ around the NWHI into two zones: the Hoomalu Zone and Mau Zone. A limited access system was established for the Hoomalu Zone which is now limited to 7 permitted vessels. Access to the Mau Zone remained unrestricted, except for excluding vessel owners permitted to

fish in the Hoomalu Zone. The Mau Zone was intended to serve as an area where fishermen could gain experience fishing in the NWHI, thereby enhancing their eligibility for subsequent entry into the Hoomalu Zone. This amendment received a categorical exclusion through NEPA.

Amendment 3 defined recruitment overfishing as a condition in which the ratio of the spawning stock biomass per recruit at the current level of fishing to the spawning stock biomass per recruit that would occur in the absence of fishing is equal to or less than 20%. Amendment 3 also delineated the process by which overfishing is monitored and evaluated. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 4 required vessel owners or operators to notify NMFS at least 72 hours before leaving port if they intend to fish in a 50 nm •study zone• around the NWHI. This notification allows Federal observers to be placed on board bottomfish vessels to record interactions with protected species if this action is deemed necessary. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 5 created a limited access system in the Mau Zone of the NWHI. Limited access permits are non-transferable and participants must take a minimum of 5 trips year and land at least 500 pound bottomfish management unit species during each trip. A total of 10 permits are allowed for the zone with 2 permits reserved for the Western Pacific Community Demonstration Program. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 6 addressed the essential fish habitat and fishing sectors provision of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. The overfishing, bycatch and communities provisions was held for revision and will be re-transmitted in 2000. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment

Crustaceans fishery

The initial provisions of the FMP, adopted in 1983, defined the management unit species (spiny lobsters), established minimum size limit, prohibited harvest by every gear except traps, banned take of egg-bearing females, prohibits fishing withing waters less than 10 fathoms in the NWHI and required permits and mandatory logbook reporting. An EIS was done with the original FMP. The FMP has since been amended nine times.

Amendment 1 adopted the State of Hawaii regulations in the EEZ around the main Hawaiian islands, from the island of Hawaii to north of Kauai. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 2 specified opening dimensions that could be used on the lobster traps in the NWHI fishery. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 3 substituted tail width for carapace lenght as size criteria and established minimum tail width for the NWHI. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 4 established a 20-nm closed area (protected species zone) around Laysan Island and prohibits fishing for slipper lobsters within waters less than 10 fathoms in the NWHI. An EA

was incorporated into the Amendment

Amendment 5 implemented a minimum size for slipper lobster, required to include escape panels in traps, required the release of egg bearing slipper lobsters, revised catch report and permit application. Changed the name of the FMP from Spiny Lobster FMP to Crustacean FMP. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 6 defined recruitment overfishing as $SPR < 0.02$. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment

Amendment 7 established in the NWHI fishery a closed season (January • June) and a limited entry program. Also created an adjustable annual harvest quota for the NWHI fleet. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 8 eliminated the •use-or-lose• landing requirement for permit renewal and developed a target Catch Per Unit Effort to forecast quotas. Currently 15 transferable permits are issued for the NWHI lobster fishery. The amendment also narrowed the notification period for vessels returning to port, required notification of enforcement before offloading, modified record keeping and reporting requirements. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment

Amendment 9 established an annual harvest guideline based on constant harvest rate of population at a specified risk of overfishing and implemented a •retain-all• fishery based on the high rate of mortality for discards. It eliminated the in-season harvest guideline adjustment and authorized the Regional Director to close the fishery by direct notice to fishery participants. Established a framework procedure and a 5 year review requirement. An EA was incorporated into the Amendment.

Amendment 10 addressed the essential fish habitat and fishing sectors provision of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. The overfishing and communities provisions was held for revision and will be re-transmitted in 2000.