



**WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL**

PRESS RELEASE

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CONTACT: Sylvia Spalding, (808) 522-8220

Council to Finalize Shark Quota, Discuss NWHI Fisheries and Coral Reef Protection

The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council meets Feb. 28 to March 2 at the Ala Moana Hotel to discuss fishery management issues for the exclusive economic zone (generally 3 to 200 miles from shore) surrounding Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and US Pacific Island remote areas. Among the key agenda items are the following:

- Public hearing and final action on a proposed annual quota of 50,000 sharks for the Hawaii longline fleet.
- Review of the lobster and bottomfish fisheries in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) and their potential impact on the Hawaiian monk seal.
- Review of the draft fishery management plan for coral reef ecosystems, including proposed no-take marine protected areas in the NWHI.
- Public hearing and final action on a revised measure to establish an area closure for large vessels fishing in federal waters surrounding American Samoa.
- Public scoping hearing/comment periods on the intent to prepare environmental impact statements for the precious corals, bottomfish and lobster fisheries and to include American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and the US Pacific Islands remote areas to these fishery management plans.

As part of its decision-making process, the Council will review recommendations from its advisory panels, plan teams and Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Among the recommendations proposed by the SSC, which met Feb. 22 to 24 in Honolulu, are the following:

- Apply the 50,000 shark quota for the Hawaii longline fleet to blue sharks only and additionally limit the take of non-blue sharks to one per trip, which must be landed dressed or whole.
- Continue the NWHI lobster and bottomfish fisheries, set a quota at 130,000 lobsters for the 2000 season, expand the NWHI lobster tagging project and replace the current lobster population assessment model used by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) with an improved one. The SSC said the current model is "deficient in several areas."
- Have the NMFS Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team specify recovery targets for the species and periodically produce populations projections so progress can be assessed. The SSC reviewed information presented by the recovery team and the US Fish Wildlife Service and saw no evidence of food limitation in the monk seal population. Girth at

weaning and survival of pups have increased over the last two years at French Frigate Shoals, location of the major breeding colonies.

- Keep management of coral reef ecosystems at the local/regional level following the Council process. The SSC continued to endorse a 0- to 10-fathom no-take zone for coral reef resources in the NWHI, with fishing for species managed under existing fishery management plans to follow their own respective regulations. However, if the Council chooses to identify additional no-take zones, the SSC said the following should be considered: 0 to 10 fathoms for all fisheries in the NWHI and 0 to 50 fathoms for all fisheries around Laysan Island, Midway Atoll (catch and release allowed) and French Frigate Shoals (one small bottomfish vessel grandfathered in). The SSC additionally recommended designated anchoring areas and installation of mooring buoys in no-take zones and a monitoring program inside and outside of the no-take zones to assess their effectiveness.
- Augment the Council staff with a lawyer or legal professional who can provide *inter alia* advice to Department of Justice lawyers in court cases involving fisheries under Council jurisdiction and request that Council legal staff be co-counsel in such court cases, as a matter of policy. The SSC was concerned about the increasing frequency of lawsuits brought against NMFS regarding fisheries under the Council's jurisdiction, including the Hawaii longline fishery for tuna and swordfish and the NWHI fisheries for bottomfish and lobsters. The SSC noted the inconsistency of a federal judge's action last year, in accepting a biological opinion that the Hawaii longline fleet is a minor threat to leatherback turtles but then proceeding to close 1.2 million square miles of fishing grounds as an additional protective measure. The SSC further noted that the closed area appears to be better suited to protect loggerhead turtles than leatherback turtles.
- Recommend to the Secretary of Commerce that the draft National Plans of Action for Sharks, Seabird-Fishery Interactions and Fishing Capacity be made available to the SSC and Council before release for public comment and that a representative from each of the eight regional fishery management councils be involved in the development of these plans and any future plans that impact their jurisdictions.

The SSC also noted its continued support of the proposed American Samoa large-vessel area closure as a measure to avoid gear conflict, enhance economic opportunity and facilitate traditional fish distribution channels within the community. In 1998, the Council passed the measure to ban vessels larger than 50 feet from fishing in federal waters within 30 miles of Swain's Island and 50 miles of all other islands in the territory. The measure was disapproved by the Secretary of Commerce in 1999.

The Council Standing Committees will meet on Feb. 28. On Feb. 29, the full Council will address coral reef management, NWHI issues (including appropriate bottomfish, crustacean and precious coral issues) and fishery rights of indigenous US Pacific Islanders. The proposed American Samoa large-vessel area closure, shark management, seabird and turtle interactions and national plans of action will be discussed on March 1. Remaining bottomfish, crustacean and precious coral issues will be addressed on March 2. The VMS workshop scheduled for March 3 has been canceled. For more information, call the Council at 522-8220 or view the Council web page at www.wpcouncil.org.

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