



March 12, 2001

Public Hearing on Draft Biological Opinion of the Pelagic Fisheries in the US Pacific Islands

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on Friday released a draft biological opinion (BO) that would significantly reduce domestic fisheries in the US Pacific islands as a measure to protect sea turtles. Requirements outlined in the BO would ban the use of shallow-set longline gear used to catch swordfish and tuna in the US Pacific islands and annually close off 1.9 million square miles of fishing grounds to other US Pacific island longline vessels during six months of the year.

Shallow-set gear accounts for about 40 percent of the \$50 million of fish landed annually by the Hawaii longline fleet. The closed area accounts for 21 percent of the bigeye and 35 percent of the yellowfin tuna (i.e., about 2.7 million pounds of fresh tuna) caught annually by Hawaii longline vessels using deep sets.

Public comments on the draft BO will be solicited during a meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council tomorrow from noon to 6 p.m. (Hawaii standard time).

WHAT: Public Comments

WHEN: 2 p.m., March 13, 2001

WHERE: Hibiscus Room I, Ala Moana Hotel, 410 Atkinson Drive, Honolulu

WHO: William Hogarth, NMFS acting assistant administrator for fisheries, and Rebecca Lent, NMFS southwest regional administrator

The public comments come two days before the Hawaii longline fishery is scheduled to close by court order. US District Judge David Ezra last summer ordered that the fishery shut down March 15 to May 31, 2001, unless NMFS completes an environmental impact statement (EIS) and he lifts the order. The draft EIS, whose public comment period ended prior to release of the BO, proposed permanent closure of the swordfish fishery and a two-month annual closure of the entire Hawaii longline fleet. The final EIS is scheduled to be completed by April 1. Meanwhile, the Council has recommended allowing the swordfish and tuna fisheries to remain operational year-round with incidental turtle hookups and entanglements incrementally reduced over a three- to five-year period, allowing fishermen time to develop gear and methods that reduce longline-turtle interactions.

For more information, please contact Sylvia Spalding, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, at 522-6044 or 479-6563 (cell) or view the Web at www.wpcouncil.org. The draft BO can be viewed on the Web at <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/piao/wpfbo/wpfbo.htm>.