



## **Summary of the Precious Coral Fishery**

### **Current Issues and Concerns**

- The potential value of the precious coral resource in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, in both monetary and scientific terms is tremendous; a conservative sustainable annual harvest for the Hawaiian EEZ is approximately 2,500 kg, valued at \$1 million; adding the value to the retail level, this would result in \$25 million to Hawaii's economy; one-half would likely come from the NWHI; due to the nature of harvesting operations, scientific data on poorly understood deep reef ecosystems would expand as well
- The Exploratory Area in Hawaii (area where precious corals are believed to exist but have not been discovered) with a total allowable annual harvest of 1,000 kg includes over 99% of the total potential precious coral habitat; of this, over 80% of this area is in the NWHI; restricting the total allowable harvest for the NWHI to 2000 levels denies the potential for this industry without offering sound reasoning for the restriction
- There have been no reports of interactions with protected mammals, turtles or seabirds at any time during any part of precious corals harvesting operations
- An EIS for the fishery is in draft form and will be available for public review soon
- Concerns regarding gold coral have been explored and addressed by the Council
- The deep-water precious coral industry in Hawaii, active in the 1970's in the Makapu'u bed off east O'ahu, has been dormant for 20 years; the fishery was revived in December 1999 with the arrival of two one-man submersibles
- In 2000, only one company has been active in deep-water precious coral harvesting; much of the year in 2000 was spent testing the operational capacities of the submersibles, surveying the known beds and exploring potential habitat near the known beds; although the industry has expressed a desire to explore the NWHI, no cruises were conducted this past year; restricting the total allowable harvest for the NWHI to 2000 levels does not consider the very recent modernization and rebirth of this fishery
- The resource could support a few more commercial interests, as has been demonstrated by the small amount of total area explored and harvested this past year
- No single company could possibly fish every bed in a single year; expeditions take weeks to plan, weeks on site, and cost \$10K a day; as each bed requires a unique permit, some beds will not be harvested in a given year; restricting the total allowable harvest for the NWHI to 2000 levels does not consider harvesting techniques and operating limitations
- The potential of a revival of the deep-water precious coral fishery has increased scientific interest in the resource with many research cruises occurring between 1997 and 2001; these cruises led to the discovery of the first precious coral bed since the FMP was enacted, the Gold Pinnacles-French Frigate Shoals Bed
- A survey of the once heavily-exploited Makapu'u bed was also completed to determine the effect of fishing pressure on recruitment, growth and recovery of precious corals as well as dives to determine the extent of the stock in most of the other known beds

## Description of Fishery

- The precious coral industry harvests black, pink, red and gold coral with highly selective methods including scuba diving and one-man submersibles; these methods produce virtually no bycatch (e.g., encrusted sponges on the harvested colony), are able to select only colonies of minimum legal size for harvest, and avoid prohibited species (i.e., gold coral in the northwest Hawaiian Islands)
- The precious coral industry has two distinct components;
  - 1) shallow-water black coral found at depths of 50-100 meters
  - 2) deep-water red, pink and gold precious corals found at depths of 350-1500 meters
- black corals have been continuously harvested for 40 years in both state and federal waters by a small group of scuba divers in waters off west Maui and south Kauai
- Fishery-independent surveys have shown the Maui and Kauai beds to be healthy; there are no known black coral beds in the northwest Hawaiian islands
- Only one short-lived venture in 1989 attempted to harvest precious corals in the NWHI since 1976. Prior to 1976, foreign vessels had fished in some areas of the NWHI

## Summary of Regulations

- Precious corals in federal waters are managed by bed-specific permits and quotas, allowing for a maximum of 5% of the standing stock to be harvested in a given year; there are seven permits for the Hawaiian EEZ and one for each of the other island areas
- Each permittee may have only **one** active permit at any given time
- The Wespac bed is designated EFH and is a refugia where no harvesting is permitted
- Size restrictions for pink coral are in place in the main Hawaiian Islands

## Pending Regulations

- The Council has explored and acted on two regulatory adjustments since the revival of the deep-water precious coral fishery;
- The 1999 regulatory adjustment (final rule expected in December) includes (1) only selective gear allowed in all permit areas, (2) minimum size restrictions for pink and black coral applies to all permit areas, (3) harvest moratorium for gold coral at Makapu'u, Brooks Bank and Gold Pinnacles beds, (4) new reporting requirements including submission of video tapes of harvesting operations, specific locations for all dives including those where no coral was taken and reports of damaged but not harvested corals
- The 2000 regulatory adjustment (in draft, submission to NMFS in December) includes an increase of the quota for the Hawaiian Exploratory area from 1,000 to 5,000 kg per year with the following restrictions; (1) maximum of 1,000 kg harvested at any given site, (2) maximum of 1,000 of 5,000 kg total quota can be gold coral, (3) no take of gold coral in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, (4) 5,000 kg quota is for one year, *renewable upon approval*, and (5) no more than 50% of the total legally harvestable stock of gold or pink coral at a given site within the exploratory area may be harvested
- The restriction of "renewable upon approval" includes a harvesting moratorium for sites in the Exploratory Area which had been harvested in the past year and to remain closed until data can be fully

analyzed and these sites can be defined as conditional beds with bed-specific quotas

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