



WESTERN  
PACIFIC  
REGIONAL  
FISHERY  
MANAGEMENT  
COUNCIL

## Press Release

For Immediate Release

June 21, 2001

Contact: Sylvia Spalding (808) 522-6044 or 479-6563 (cell)

---

### **Council Approves Mega-Refugia for NW Hawaiian Islands Precious Corals, Adopts Coral Reef Ecosystem Plan**

The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council today in Honolulu agreed to the establishment of a mega-refugia for deep-water precious corals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). The refugia would run approximately 250 miles from the existing Wespac Refugia to the southeastern edge of Brooks Bank and to a depth of 750 fathoms (i.e., 4,500 foot). Within it, the harvesting of pink, red and gold precious coral would be banned.

Additionally, the Council voted to ban the harvesting of gold coral throughout the entire NWHI and to limit the harvest of pink and red coral to 5 percent of the stock. These and other conservation measures adopted by the Council address concerns about the potential use of gold coral beds by endangered monk seals and would ensure NWHI pink and red coral are not overharvested, while allowing for sustainable use.

The deepwater corals are used to produce fine jewelry and has a potential annual economic value to state of Hawaii of about \$25 million.

Also today, the Council finalized its Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan, which establishes conservation measures to protect coral reef resources in federal waters (generally, 3 to 200 miles from shore) surrounding Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and other U.S. Pacific islands. The plan, which will be forwarded to

the Secretary of Commerce for approval, establishes a network of marine protected areas (MPAs), which are zoned as no-take or low-use.

The no-take zones encompass about 20 percent of the coral reef habitat found in federal waters surrounding the US Pacific islands. Within these zones, all fishing and other extractive activities (e.g., for commercial, recreational, subsistence, cultural and/or scientific purposes) would be prohibited. About 70 percent of the no-take areas are in the NWHI, including federal waters 0 to 10 fathoms (0 to 60 feet) throughout the 1,200-mile chain and federal waters 0 to 50 fathoms (0 to 300 feet) around Laysan, French Frigate Shoals and half of Midway. Other no-take zones include waters 0 to 50 fathoms (0 to 300 feet) around Jarvis Island, Howland Island, Baker Island, Kingman Reef and Rose Atoll.

The low-use zones, which require a special permit to harvest coral reef resources not already covered by existing fishery management plans, include federal waters 10 to 50 fathoms (60 to 300 feet) throughout the NWHI unless designated a no-take zone and 0 to 50 fathoms (0 to 300 feet) around Johnston, Wake and Palmyra Atolls and half of Midway Atoll.

Also the Guam's southern banks is designated an MPA within which anchoring by vessels larger than 50 feet is prohibited.

The Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan establishes permit and reporting requirements and bans the take of wild live rock and live hard corals (except for seed stock for aquaculture of live coral and for indigenous use). It establishes fishing gear restrictions that prohibit the use of poisons, explosives and intoxicating substances; bans spearfishing with scuba gear at night in the NWHI and remote U.S. Pacific islands; and limits the use of traps to

appropriate areas and conditions. Additionally, it requires fishing vessels operating in or transiting through MPAs to carry insurance to cover the cost of vessel removal and pollution cleanup in the event of a grounding and establishes a process to rapidly adjust the fishery management measures as needed. Potential future adjustments identified in the plan include the establishment of mooring buoys and anchoring areas in MPAs, vessel monitoring requirements and additional permit requirements, among others. The plan also includes measures to establish a formal process for ensuring that fisheries operating under existing fishery management plans do not negatively impact the coral reef ecosystem, to facilitate consistency among state/territorial and federal management of coral reef resources and to foster public education of coral reef management issues.

Also today, the Council voiced its continued opposition to the March 29, 2001, biological opinion (BO) on Pacific marine turtles and will write a letter to the Secretary of Commerce noting the severe negative impacts of the BO on all federal pelagic fisheries of the U.S. Pacific islands. The Council intends to work with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to revise the BO so as to allow a reasonable level of swordfish style fishing. The Council also recommends that NMFS outline its plans for recovering the swordfish fishery in Hawaii if its planned swordfish fishery experiment, which requires a special permit under the Endangered Species Act, fails to materialize.

Earlier this week, the Council continued to support the development of a limited entry program for the American Samoa longline fishery and urged NMFS to expedite implementation of a 50-nautical-mile closed area for pelagic fishing vessels larger than 50 feet in federal waters

around the islands of American Samoa. Market demand for albacore tuna has led to the recent influx of large pelagic fishing vessels into American Samoa. This influx along with new restrictions in other U.S. Pacific fisheries has created a situation the local commercial and recreational fishermen view as in need of urgent federal action. Anticipating the likelihood of such an influx, the Council in 1998 developed the area closure measure, which NMFS disapproved in 1999 as an unnecessary precaution.

The Council also approved the development of a Marine Turtle Conservation Assessment, which recognizes that the remaining U.S. pelagic fisheries are under threat unless the continuing decline of turtle populations are not reversed and that implementation of U.S. recovery plans for turtles has been at best modest. The Council noted that it must take a proactive role in the implementation of recovery plans, which need to be reviewed and updated in light of significant new information on turtle populations.

Among other actions taken during the four-day meeting, which concludes today, the Council voted to explore the feasibility of using video monitoring in the NWHI bottomfish fishery and to organize an International Fisheries Forum to be held November 2002 in Honolulu to address seabird and turtle bycatch issues.

#####