



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Closing Hawaii Longline Fisheries Will Do More Harm than Good for Turtle Conservation

HONOLULU (12 March 2001)—The federal government last week Friday released a draft biological opinion (BO) that would significantly reduce domestic fisheries in the US Pacific islands. The proposed measures in the BO could also bode ill for turtle conservation research.

"This BO will basically eliminate the only source of information scientists have on the interactions of sea turtles with shallow-set longline gear in the central Pacific," notes Kitty M. Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council headquartered in Honolulu. "Our fishery is the only fishery that reports all protected species interactions and mortalities on the high seas and makes it public. It's unfortunate that this fishery will be shut down."

Measurements outlined in the BO would permanently close the swordfish fishery in the US Pacific islands and annually close off 1.9 million square miles of fishing grounds to US Pacific island tuna vessels during six months of the year. However, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council had earlier requested that NMFS adopt alternative turtle mitigation measures that would require Hawaii longline vessels to reduce turtle takes by 75 percent over a three- to five-year period. This incremental reduction in turtle takes would allow Hawaii fishermen an opportunity to devise turtle-friendly fishing gear and methods during the period.

"This would be a win-win situation because the newly developed gear could be utilized by foreign fisheries that account for the vast majority of the turtle takes in the Pacific and worldwide," Simonds said. "Unfortunately, the BO does not clearly allow for any experimental swordfish fishery to occur." The Council is also focusing on research and international efforts to address the turtle issue. "It's everybody's problem, not just ours," Simonds said.

William Hogarth, NMFS acting assistant administrator for fisheries, and Rebecca Lent, NMFS southwest regional administrator, will be in Honolulu tomorrow (March 13) to take public comments on the draft opinion at 2 p.m. at the Ala Moana Hotel during a meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council to be held from noon to 6 p.m. (Hawaii standard time). Persons in Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI) can participate by teleconference.

For more information on the Council meeting, please contact the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, 1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813; ph. (808) 522-8220; fax (808) 522-8226; www.wpcouncil.org.

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