



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

PRESS RELEASE

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Federal Fishery Council to Address Recovery of Sea Turtles, Adopt Coral Reef Ecosystem Management Plan

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council will meet June 18 to 21, 2001, at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, to discuss fishery management in federal waters (generally, 3 to 200 miles offshore) surrounding Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and US Pacific Island possessions. Among the topics of interest are the following:

Recovery of Sea Turtles The federal government recently closed the Hawaii longline swordfish fishery and restricted the Hawaii longline tuna fishery due to concerns about the status of Pacific sea turtle populations, especially leatherbacks and loggerheads. The government says these actions are intended to avoid jeopardizing sea turtles, but are not intended to recover in themselves the turtle populations. Scientists universally acknowledge that these actions alone will not result in recovery. However, unless the turtle populations show signs of recovery or the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) modifies its method of determining "jeopardy" of a species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the fisheries will likely face continued federal restrictions. The Council will consider spearheading an international expert consultation on the recovery of marine turtles and developing a Marine Turtle Conservation Plan for the Western Pacific Region.

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Coral Reef Ecosystem Management The Council will take final action on its Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan (FMP), the first ecosystem-based federal fishery management plan in the United States. Final adoption of this plan, which has been six years in the making, has been slowed recently by uncertainties surrounding the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, established during the last weeks of the Clinton administration. At its March 2001 meeting, the Council postponed final adoption of the plan so the new administration could have more time to clarify ambiguities surrounding the NWHI Reserve and so Council staff and advisors could further consider public testimony, including late testimony from the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Enforcement The Council will consider a request by the US Coast Guard to extend the allowable use of vessel monitoring system (VMS) data. The Council pioneered the use of VMS as a fishery management tool, requiring its use on all Hawaii longline vessels to continually track their location in national and international waters. The original purpose was to ensure compliance with area closures. The Coast Guard is seeking permission to use the VMS data to help enforcement vessels conduct at-sea boarding, thus slashing the cost to locate the vessels.

Observers A draft environmental impact statement and a biological opinion are being prepared for the NWHI bottomfish fishery. Of particular concern is potential interactions with endangered Hawaiian monk seals. NMFS may possibly require some observer coverage. While NMFS has placed observers on bottomfish boats on occasion in the past, vessel size (restricted to 60-foot length overall) and trip length (about three weeks average) leave little to no space to accommodate an observer onboard. The Council will thus investigate the potential use of digital observer monitoring systems. If acceptable, these systems might also be used on Hawaii longline

vessels to ensure compliance with seabird and turtle mitigation measures, reducing the need for on-board observers and at-sea boarding by enforcement officers, which has inherent safety risks.

Deepwater Precious Corals The Council will consider further regulations for the exploratory area off the Hawaiian Islands (i.e., area without designated precious coral beds), which would link allowable takes to stock abundance.

Crustaceans The Council will be updated on NMFS research and population modeling initiatives for the Hawaii NWHI lobster fishery. Last year, NMFS closed the lobster fishery due to uncertainties in the model that was being used.

Indigenous Fishery Rights The Council will review the status of the Community Demonstration Projects Program, which aims to encourage and support indigenous fishery practices; the Native Observer Program, which aims to train and place US Pacific Islanders as observers on US Pacific Island vessels; efforts to establish an allowable take of sea turtles for cultural purposes; and Marine Conservation Plans, which would allow Guam, American Samoa and CNMI to use the fees collected under fishing agreements with foreign fleets.

The Council will also consider the recommendations of its Scientific and Statistical Committee, plan teams and advisory panel. **The Commercial, Recreational, Indigenous/- Subsistence and Ecosystem and Habitat Advisory Sub-panels will meet June 15 and 16, 2001, at the Ala Moana Hotel.**

For more information, contact the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, 1164 Bishop St., Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813; ph. (808) 522-8220; fax (808) 522-8226; e-mail nmfs.wprfmc@noaa.gov; <http://www.wpcouncil.org>.

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