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Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Federal Policy Change Burdens Hawaii Fishermen with International Problem

HONOLULU (Feb. 15, 2001)—An unannounced policy change in the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) may abruptly close the Hawaii swordfish fishery and cause extreme hardship for Hawaii's tuna longline fishery. A biological opinion on the effects of the Hawaii longline fishery on sea turtles, to be released tomorrow for internal review only, will likely find that the fishery jeopardizes the existence of some turtle species, said Rebecca Lent, NMFS Southwest Regional Administrator. This is in extreme contrast to the previous BO on the fishery, which came to the opposite conclusion. Moreover, the reason for the flip-flop conclusion surprised even Lent herself.

According to Charles Karnella, administrator of NMFS Pacific Islands Area Office, the conclusions differ because NMFS took a different approach to look at the information.

Addressing the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, meeting in Honolulu today, Karnella explained that, in 1998, NMFS looked to see if removal of the Hawaii longline fishery would have an impact on the sea turtle populations. "The picture didn't change at all, so we used that to determine that the activity itself is not likely to jeopardize [the species]," said Karnella. Now, all impacts (foreign and domestic) on the species, all the slices of the pie, are looked at. "We have to address every small, medium, big piece of the pie," Karnella said.

Unfortunately, NMFS can't regulate the medium piece of the pie, the thousands of foreign longliners and gillnetters that catch many more turtles than the Hawaii longline fleet, nor can it regulate the big piece of the pie, the poaching and destruction at nesting beaches, all of which occur outside of the United States and for which there is little information. The US government can only regulate the smallest, insignificant pieces of the pie, the Hawaii longline fishery.

Despite repeated requests by the Council and the Hawaii longline fishermen, NMFS wouldn't include them in the consultation process nor will it provide them with a copy of the draft BO---another arbitrary NMFS policy. However, NMFS officials indicated that 75 percent reduction in the incidental take of leatherback turtles will probably be required. Rushing to complete the BO before the environmental impact statement (EIS) ordered by Judge David Ezra

to be completed by April 1, NMFS said it looked at closure of the swordfish fishery and time-area closures for the tuna fishery to arrive at the reductions.

Ironically, these measures may actually increase the takes of turtles. According to the draft EIS, the 45 Hawaii swordfish vessels could leave Hawaii waters, which are low in turtle takes, for other waters with much higher turtle takes. Further, there could likely be increased US imports of swordfish and tuna from foreign fisheries that have higher turtle takes—such as Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Brazil—and no observers, no logbooks and possibly no regulations against retention of the turtles.

“Is it prudent and commonsense to tweak this part of the pie if it causes a larger increase in the other part of the pie,” asked Roy Morioka, chair of the Council’s Pelagic Standing Committee.

“We looked at effort switching in closed areas but haven’t looked at effort switching to Brazil ... or market substitution,” Lent said.

Another thing NMFS may have not considered is that turtle mortalities of leatherbacks have a higher correlation with forced submergence, or drownings, than hookups. NMFS is looking at closing the swordfish fishery, but turtles caught in that fishery are apparently able to surface to breathe.

George Balaz, NMFS turtle expert, said 10 of the 12 turtle deaths associated with the Hawaii longline fishery were caused by forced submergence.

Longline fisherman Sean Martin asked NMFS if it could take the whole-pie policy approach it has apparently adopted in the last six to eight months and have the 75 percent reduction plan implemented over a three-year period.

Requiring immediate 75 percent reduction will result in irreparable damage to the fishery, noted Jim Cook, co-owner of Pacific Ocean Producers.

The Council will ask NMFS to allow the Hawaii swordfish fishery to operate as a demonstration fishery for a finite period (e.g., three years), with 100 percent observer coverage and a set maximum turtle take, initially set at 10 percent below the incidental take levels specified in the 1998 BO, with a 75% reduction at the end of the trials. During this time, turtle mitigation measures will be tested that could possibly reduce takes while allowing the fishery to operate. The plus to this is mitigation measures could be developed that are exportable.

The Council request is being sent to the Department of Commerce today in the hopes that it could influence the outcome of the BO before its final release, scheduled for late next week.

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