



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Federal Proposal Would Send Hawaii Boats out of Tuna Grounds and into Turtle Grounds

HONOLULU (10 March 2001)—Less than one week before the Hawaii longline fishery is scheduled to shut down, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) yesterday released a document that would allow Hawaii vessels targeting tuna to operate year-round but not in productive tuna grounds.

The draft biological opinion for fisheries operating under the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Pelagic Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region would ban the use of shallow-set gear used to catch swordfish and tuna in the North Pacific by domestic vessels in the US Pacific islands and implement regulatory disincentives so Hawaii longline vessels could not easily target swordfish from other ports and then return to Hawaii to target tuna. It would also prohibit Hawaii longline vessels from operating in waters between the equator and 16°N latitude and 145° and 180°W longitude from January 15 to June 15 each year.

However, the opinion (which is required under the Endangered Species Act) would allow Hawaii longline vessels targeting tuna to operate year-round in waters north of Hawaii where populations of endangered leatherback turtles are more concentrated.

While 115 Hawaii longline vessels operating under limited entry permits would be banned for half the year from 1.9 million square miles of the Pacific Ocean where tuna aggregation is high and turtle migration is low, more than 4,000 foreign longline vessels and hundreds of domestic and foreign purse seiners could continue fishing in the "closed" area.

This area includes waters in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), 0 to 200 miles from shore, around the US Pacific islands of Howland, Baker Jarvis, Kingman and Palmyra; waters around the EEZ of the Republic of Kiribati; and the high seas (waters beyond 200 miles from any land).

Kitty Simonds, Executive Director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, noted that preliminary analysis conducted by the National Marine Fisheries Service indicates that the implementation of the five-month area closure will reduce annual Hawaii longline bigeye catch by 21 percent and yellowfin by 35 percent. Hawaii longline vessels could try to make up the difference by fishing in non-traditional fishing grounds, but the lower catch-per-unit-effort would require more hooks set and increase the opportunities for turtle hookups and entanglements, which are random events. Furthermore, market demands will likely force the US to import fish from fishing countries with higher turtle take rates than the Hawaii fishery.

— more —

As a result, this federal action would contradict the intent of the Endangered Species Act by reducing rather improving the survivability and recovery of sea turtle populations.

She also expressed dismay that an experimental swordfish fishery to develop new methods and gears that would minimize interactions with marine turtles is not clearly provided for in the opinion. Scientists, fishermen, US gear manufacturers and fishery managers have expressed interest in such a fishery, as the mitigation methods developed could then be made available to foreign fisheries, which are less regulated and have higher turtle interactions.

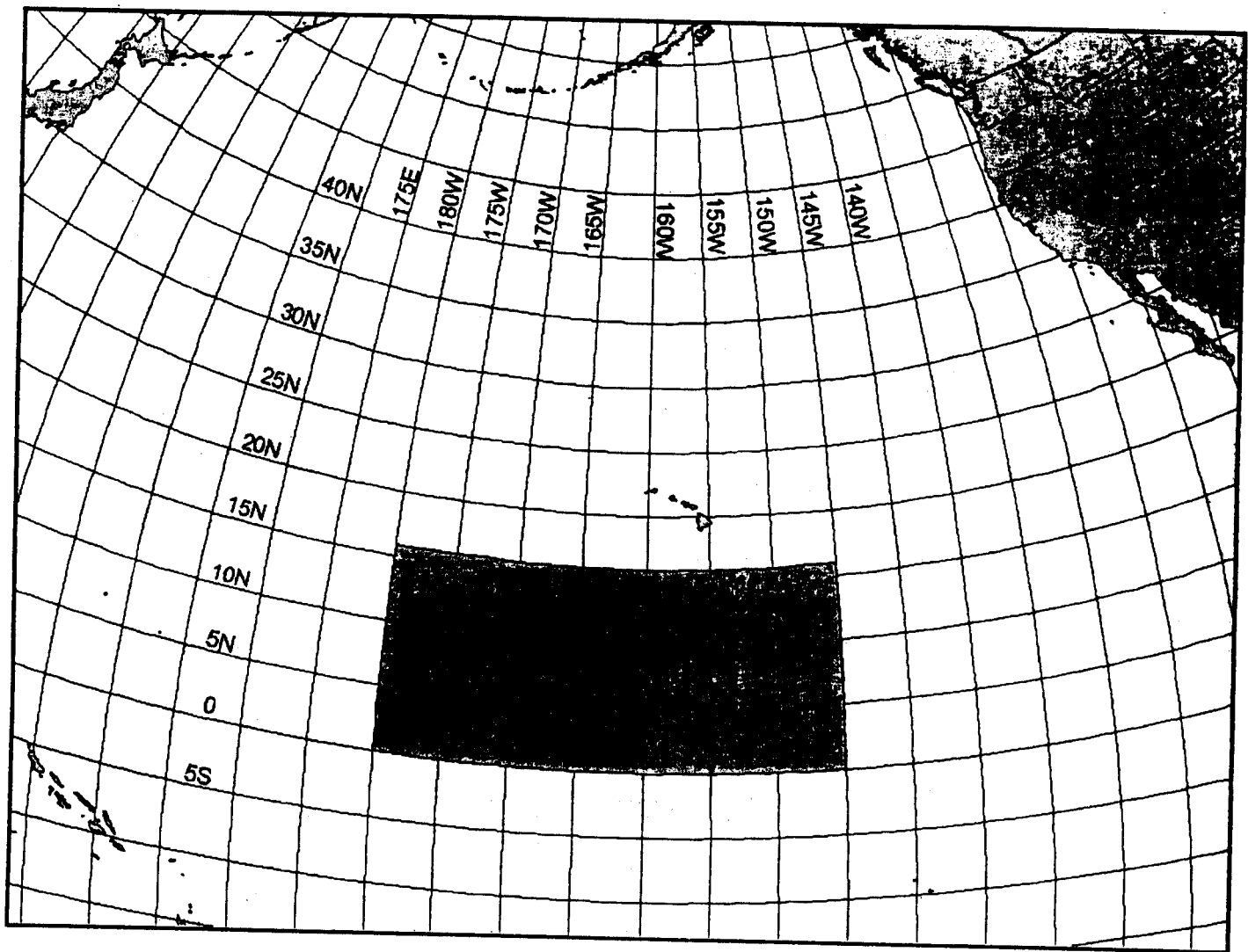
The draft biological opinion is the latest in a series of time-area closures and gear restrictions proposed for the Hawaii longline fleet since environmental groups concerned about marine turtle populations sued NMFS in late 1999. Currently, the fishery is operating under a limitation ordered by US District Judge David Ezra in August 2000 that allows minimal swordfish fishing under 100 percent observer coverage and closes the entire Hawaii longline fleet completely from March 15 to May 31. The court-ordered management regime remains in place until NMFS completes an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the fishery by April 1. The draft EIS, released by NMFS in December 2000, proposes closing the swordfish fishery entirely and shutting the tuna fishery every April and May.

William Hogarth, NMFS acting assistant administrator for fisheries, and Rebecca Lent, NMFS southwest regional administrator, will be in Honolulu on 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.

Fishermen from Guam have already voiced concern about the ban on shallow-set longline gear. Under the terms of the opinion, three domestic vessels preparing to utilize this gear type to catch tuna would be shut down. The fishermen note that foreign vessels that use this same gear type could continue to land fish in Guam while domestic vessels would not.

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. Teleconference times and locations are also available by calling the Guam Economic Development Authority (671) 475-0321; NMI Division of Fish and Wildlife Resources (670) 664-6000; or American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources 011 (684) 633-4456. The draft biological opinion can be viewed on the Web at <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/piao/wpfbp/wpfbo.htm>.

**Figure 11. Hawaii Longline Closed Area
Under the Reasonable and Prudent Alternative
January 15 - June 15, Annually**



Longline Closure

1.9 million square miles

0 500 1000 Miles

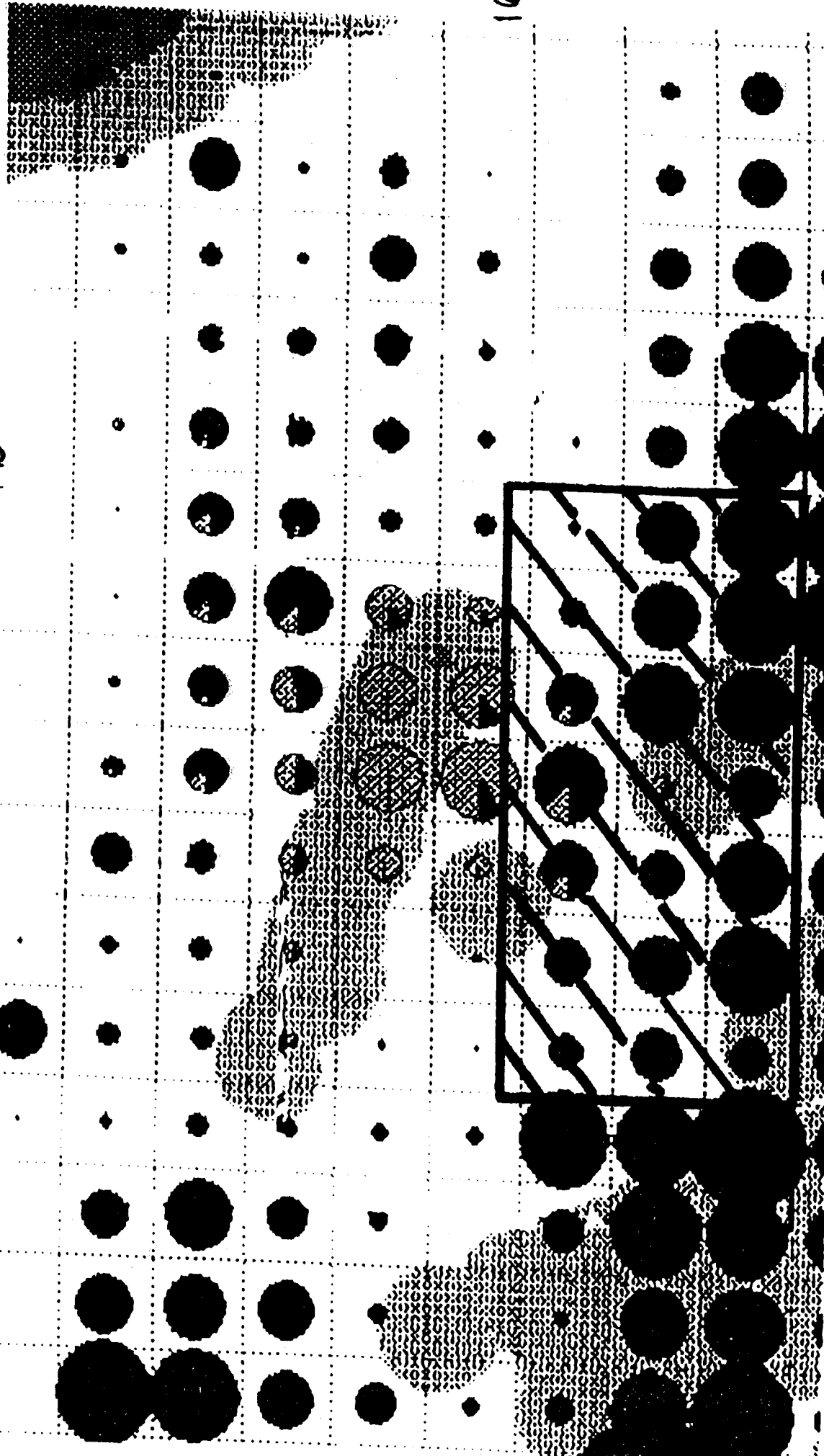


Graph from NMFS Draft Biological Opinion for Pelagic Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region. March 8, 2001.

145°

180°

16



This graph separates effort from the Hawaii-based longline fleet (stippled color within effort circles) from foreign effort (black color within effort circles). The graph also displays Exclusive Economic Zones as stippled areas of much larger circles. The box from 0-16° North and 145-180 degrees represents a 1.9 million square nautical mile closed area to the Hawaii-based longline fleet as described in the Reasonable and Prudent Alternatives of the draft Biological Opinion for Pelagic Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region.