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# Press Release

For Immediate Release

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## Let Them Catch Lobster, Council Says

HONOLULU (13 Feb. 2001)—Two years ago Craig Yeackel paid about \$75,000 for a permit to harvest lobsters in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). But he hasn't been able to use the permit, and now he may never be given the opportunity.

"Manage the fishery as it is. Continue to open it," Yeackel told the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council today at a public hearing in Honolulu. The Council was considering extending the year 2000 lobster closure for another year at the most productive banks and two more years elsewhere in the NWHI.

After listening to public testimony, the recommendations of its scientific advisory body and reports from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the majority of the Council members voted to allow permitted fishermen to take 130,000 lobsters from the NWHI in 2001. This decision runs counter to other recent actions.

- On Sept. 29, 2000, NMFS Southwest Region informed the US District Court in Honolulu that it intended to keep the fishery closed for two years in the primary grounds and three years elsewhere. The reason for the closure was increasing uncertainty in the population model estimates and shortcoming of assumption used to estimate the exploitable population. On Feb. 9, 2001, NMFS prepared a *Federal Register* notice announcing that harvest guidelines for the 2001 fishery will not be issued.
- On Nov. 15, 2000, the US District Court in Honolulu ordered the fishery remain closed until an updated environmental impact statement (EIS) on the fishery is completed. The preliminary draft EIS is at NMFS SW Region for review, but the office has as its priority completion of an EIS on the pelagics fishery of the Western Pacific Region. If the pelagics EIS is not completed in the next couple of weeks, the Hawaii longline fishery will be shut down from March 15 to May 31.
- President Clinton signed executive order 13178 establishing the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve on Dec. 4, 2000, and EO 13196 finalizing the Reserve on Jan. 18, 2001. The EOs specify that, for all commercial fishing other than for bottomfish, "the annual aggregate level [of take] shall be the permittee's individual take in the year preceding December 4, 2000, as determined by the Secretary [of Commerce]." For bottomfishing, "the annual aggregate level for each permitted bottomfisher shall be that permittee's individual average taken over the 5 years preceding December 4, 2000, as determined by the Secretary." In 1999, permitted NWHI fishermen were allowed to harvest 243,100 lobsters. The allowable catch for the lobster fishery is usually taken within a few weeks of the opening of the six-month season in July.

"I'd agree to a two- to three-year closure, but not a permanent closure," Yeackel said in an interview after the public hearing. "Don't take something from me that I never used."

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