



Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Managers, Fishermen to Address Regulatory Threats to Hawaii Fisheries

HONOLULU (11 Feb. 2001)—Members of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council will meet Feb. 12 to 15 in Honolulu to discuss management of fisheries in the federal waters (generally, 3 to 200 miles from shore) surrounding Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and US Pacific island possessions. Among the key issues to be discussed are a series of recently announced pending regulations that could threaten the future existence of Hawaii's longline, bottomfish, lobster, deep-water precious coral and coral reef-associated fisheries.

- **The National Marine Fisheries Service's draft environmental impact statement on the pelagic fisheries of the Western Pacific Region, released Dec. 18, 2000**, contains preferred alternatives that would shut the Hawaii longline fishery April 1–May 31 each year and require all vessels in the fleet to use a line shooter and set mainlines so the minimum depth between floats is deeper than 300 feet. According to NMFS Honolulu Laboratory, these actions would reduce Hawaii longline-turtle interactions by 76 percent for endangered leatherback turtles (currently estimated mortality is 10 to 11 per year) and by 42 to 100 percent for other sea turtle species. The measures would eliminate swordfish longline fishing and reduce Hawaii longline revenues (currently about \$50 million landed value) by a projected 20 percent if swordfish vessels switch to targeting tuna and 40 percent if they don't. It is envisioned that some vessels will not be able to generate sufficient income in 10 months to cover annual operating expenses.
- **The National Marine Fisheries Service's pending biological opinion on the effects of the Hawaii longline fishery on Pacific sea turtles, soon to be released, reportedly contains restrictions that are more severe than the Pelagics EIS.** The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee has proposed a framework where turtle mitigation measures could either be tested or demonstrated in the Hawaii fishery using swordfish targeting longline gear, with the objective of achieving a 75% reduction in turtle takes over a three-year period.
- **The Department of the Interior's orders establishing the Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuges, announced Jan. 18, 2001, prohibit commercial fishing within 12 nautical miles of emergent land,** an area used by Hawaii longline vessels. The Kingman EA lists a catalog of potential threats to the reefs without any supportive evidence. Recent surveys of Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll by US Fish and Wildlife Service and NMFS found both the inshore reef areas to be in pristine or near pristine condition.
- **The biological opinion of the US Fish and Wildlife Service on the effects of the Hawaii-based longline fishery on the short-tailed albatross, released Nov. 28, 2000, include**

mitigation measures that are based on, but more stringent than, the Council's measures to mitigate against interactions between the Hawaii longline fleet and Laysan and black-footed albatross. However, there is no data to support the effectiveness of the proposed measures on short-tailed albatross. Moreover, the assumed biological distribution of short-tailed albatross and interaction rate with the Hawaii longline fishery are contrary to all evidence. There have been no recorded interactions between a short-tailed albatross and a Hawaii longline vessel and only one sighting of a short-tailed albatross by an observer on a Hawaii longline vessel.

- **Recategorization of the Hawaii longline fishery from Category III to (a fishery with lowest likelihood for marine mammal interactions) to Category II under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, announced Jan. 22, 2001**, is reportedly based on the fishery's interactions with an array of marine mammal species. However, NMFS observer data shows that in more than 3,000 sets between 1994 and 1999, the Hawaii longline fishery interacted with only three dolphin species and three whales species out of 20 cetacean species found in the area. Of the 19 individual marine mammals caught, all but one were released alive.
- **President Clinton's executive order 13178 establishing the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve (Dec. 4, 2000) and executive order 13196 finalizing the Reserve (Jan. 18, 2001).** Implementing the executive orders could reduce the NWHI bottomfish fishery (which provides 40 percent of the commercial bottomfish landed in the state) by two-thirds; permanently close the only commercial lobster fishery in the state (worth \$1 million to \$6 million); permanently close other commercial fisheries, such as bioprospecting and deepwater precious coral (worth \$1 million in landed value and \$25 million to associated local businesses). Two deepwater manned-submersibles that harvest deepwater precious coral and engage in salvage and research operations are leaving Hawaii because their allowable harvest area would be reduced by 75 percent.

Potential displacement of Hawaii longline vessels through proposed area closures has led to concern about the potential for gear conflicts with the Hawaii offshore handline fishery at Cross Seamount, located about 150 miles southwest of Honolulu. American Samoa has also expressed concern about the potential for larger US longline vessels competing with its domestic fleet of longline catamarans, which average about 30 feet. The Council will consider establishment of limited entry programs at Cross Seamount and American Samoa. It will review the proposed area closure for fishing vessels larger than 50 feet in American Samoa; consider the need to regulate vertical longline gear, deepsea FADs and other fishing methods; and reevaluate its adopted quotas on sharks, given the recent Congressional ban on the landing of shark fins.

The issues regarding the longline fishery will be addressed on Wed., February 14. ***On that day at 2 p.m., fishermen are invited to provide their opinions on the pelagic issues during a Fishermen's Forum.*** Issues regarding precious corals, bottomfish and crustacean fisheries will be addressed 1:30 to 5 p.m., Tues., Feb. 13. A public hearing will be held at 4 p.m. on an amendment to extend the NWHI lobster fishery closure. The Council's draft Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan and the impacts of President Clinton's executive orders on the NWHI fisheries and will be addressed Thursday morning, Feb. 15. Standing committees meet the first day, Mon., Feb. 12. Public comment periods are provided throughout the agenda.

In sharp contrast to these proposed regulations, is the healthy state of the fish stocks of the Western Pacific Region, as presented in the *Status of Fisheries of the United States* in the January 2001 report to Congress. None of the 72 stocks in the nation where overfishing is occurring is associated with the Western Pacific Region.