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Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Scientists Recommend Alternative Turtle Plan

HONOLULU (2 Feb. 2001)—Scientists from throughout the Pacific, meeting in Honolulu Jan. 30 to Feb. 1, have developed a plan designed to reduce interactions between Hawaii longline vessels and sea turtles and rebuild the sea turtle populations. The plan allows the fishery to operate for a set number of years to demonstrate the efficacy and financial viability of mitigation measures. Limits are placed on the number of turtles that can be hooked or entangled by each segment of the fishery, i.e., day-time tuna fishing, night-time swordfish fishing and mixed tuna-swordfish fishing. There would be immediate at-sea reporting of turtle interactions to ensure the limits are not surpassed. Swordfish vessels would have 100 percent observer coverage; tuna vessels would begin at 20 percent observer coverage. An experimental swordfish fishery in the subtropical transition zone would test mitigation measures for loggerhead turtles. Active support would be given to protect turtle nesting sites, reduce directed fisheries for turtles and further mitigation research in areas of the world with high turtle bycatch. Hawaii fishermen would be active in developing and testing bycatch reduction measures and would be compensated for fishing under provisions of the demonstration and experimental projects.

The plan is an alternative to those provided in the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the pelagic fisheries of the Western Pacific Region, released by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in December 2000. The NMFS preferred alternative would shut the Hawaii longline fishery between April 1 and 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. Based on a simulation model developed by NMFS Honolulu Laboratory, actions under the preferred alternative 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 green and loggerhead turtles. The measures would eliminate swordfish longline fishing and reduce revenues (currently about \$48 million) 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.

Drafting of the EIS was one of the requirements placed on NMFS as a result of litigation brought by EarthJustice Legal Defense Fund on behalf of the Center for Marine Conservation and Turtle Island Restoration Network. The lawsuit asserts NMFS had not fulfilled its obligations under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) with respect to the continued operation of the Hawaii longline fishery. The ESA allegation was defeated, but US District Judge David Ezra upheld the NEPA challenge and required NMFS to complete an updated EIS by April 1, 2001.

The scientists are members of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The group advises the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, which is responsible for developing, monitoring and modifying fishery management plans for federal waters (generally, 3 to 200 miles offshore) surrounding Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and US Pacific island possessions.

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