



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

Press Release

For Immediate Release

Contact: Sylvia Spalding 522-6044, or Paul Dalzell, 522-6042

Scientists Urge Feds to Act to Recover Sea Turtles

HONOLULU (21 May 2001)—The 15-member Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council is urging the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to step up implementation of existing recovery plans for marine turtles.

“Recovery plans have been developed for several species of Pacific marine turtles that stipulate and prioritize actions to be taken to assist marine turtles to recover,” notes the SSC. “To our knowledge no participation plans ... have been developed and few priority 1 items described in the recovery plans have been implemented, despite continued decline of Pacific turtle populations.”

Presentations by NMFS demonstrated that, to recover marine turtle populations, it is essential to protect females and eggs on and around nesting beaches, as well as reduce unintended capture by fishing vessels.

The recommendation of the SSC last week in Honolulu comes on the heels of federal court action March 30 that shut down the Hawaii longline fishery targeting swordfish and restricted the Hawaii longline fishery targeting tuna due to concerns about interactions with marine turtles. The court decision is based on a biological opinion issued by NMFS on March 29.

However, the SSC found that the conclusions in the BO are not based on the best available science, in that a quantitative analysis of the connection between population dynamics of sea turtles and take levels of the fishery is inadequately presented.

Penny Ruvelas of the NMFS Office of Protected Species told the SSC by teleconference that the BO should be viewed as a "legal and policy" document. She also said it is not the purpose of the BO to assist in the recovery and survivability of the species as that is purpose of the recovery plans. The BO assesses the effects of a future federal action, such as a federally regulated fishery, on threatened or endangered species.

Among other issues taken up by the SSC was the future management of the fisheries in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). Eleventh-hour executive orders by President Clinton created the 84-million-square-mile NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, which encompasses traditional fishing grounds for bottomfish, lobsters and deep-water precious corals. Under the executive orders, closed areas and fishing caps are being set and are to be fine-tuned by the National Ocean Service, with the advice of a Reserve Council. The SSC expressed concern about potential discontinuity in fisheries management and continued compliance with the national standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act given that the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council has managed the fisheries in the NWHI since 1976.

Recommendations from the SSC and other advisory groups will be reviewed by the Council at its next meeting, June 18 to 21, 2001, at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu. For more information, call the Council at 522-8220 or view the Council Web site at www.wpcouncil.org.

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