



**WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL**

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 14, 2000
CONTACT: Sylvia Spalding, (808) 875-5875 (Maui)

Coral Reef Needs of US Pacific Islands Debated

President Clinton on May 26 announced a 90-day deadline to develop a plan to protect coral reefs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council has been working for five years on a plan to manage and conserve coral reefs in federal waters (generally, 3 to 200 miles from shore) of not just the NWHI but all of the US Pacific Islands. Today the Council continued the process, hearing advisory group and public comments on preferred alternatives adopted for the Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan (FMP). Discussion also focused on the best use of \$20 million that Hawaii Senators Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka have proposed in separate bills for coral reef protection.

"Just going out and monitoring has been done," noted Rick Grigg, a researcher at the University of Hawaii, Department of Oceanography, and chair of the Council's precious coral plan team. "The money coming down from Congress should target problems and not just monitor and monitor to tell us what we already know. ... Let's build on existing knowledge."

Grigg has studied coral reefs in Hawaii for several decades and headed a \$10-million scientific investigation of the NWHI between 1978 and 1983. He said that about every five years storms in the NWHI reduce coral coverage to 10 percent in some areas. The coral reef coverage eventually returns to 50 up to 90 percent, depending on how protected the area is, he noted.

As for the recent vessel grounding at Pearl and Hermes, he said it should be put into perspective. A similar grounding at French Frigate Shoals in recent years damaged a 10- by 100-meter section of reef. Once the vessel was removed, the V-shape "damage" actually provided fish with more habitat area, he noted.

Other scientists, environmentalists and indigenous representatives addressing the Council today advocated for marine protected areas and no-take zones. Joshua Nowlis of the Center for Marine Conservation and Rob Wilder of the Pacific Whale Foundation argued that extractive scientific research as well as fishing should be prohibited in no-take zones. Bioprospecting could especially be a potential risk, Nowlis said.

The draft Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP identifies all NWHI waters where coral reefs can potentially grow, i.e., from 0 to 50 fathoms depth, as marine protected areas. In addition, 0 to 10 fathoms throughout the NWHI and 0 to 50 fathoms around Midway, French Frigate Shoals and Laysan are identified as no-take zones. Another management measure would require pollution and wreck removal insurance for fishing vessels. But some fishermen argue that such a regulation would unfairly target them as many larger cargo, research, military, passenger and foreign fishing vessels that transit NWHI waters are not required to have the insurance.

The Council meeting concludes tomorrow with discussion on shark, turtle, tuna and bottomfish management; new-entry criteria for the NWHI Mau Zone limited entry bottomfish fishery; and amending existing FMPs to include the Northern Mariana Islands and US Pacific Island possessions. The meeting starts at 8:30 a.m. at the Maui Prince Hotel, Makena, Maui.