WPRFMC Pelagics Report: *65th Meeting of SSC*

Report of the 65th Meeting of the Scientific and Statistical Committee
Ilima Room, Ala Moana Hotel
Honolulu, Hawaii
8-10 April 1997
Pelagics

Introduction

Robert Schroeder (Council Staff) introduced the revisions required under the 1996 re-authorization of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. These included, Consistency of Definitions, Bycatch, Fishing Sectors , Essential Fish Habitat, Fishing Communities and Overfishing. The meeting considered these issues in the context of each Fisheries Management Plan area.

Pelagic fisheries research

John Sibert presented an updated report on the status of the PFRP funded projects. He indicated that there had been little change from the last report in October 1996, with no new projects initiated. This was due to the shortfall and delay in available funding, although ongoing projects continue to progress well while numerous others have been completed. Of specific interest are PFRP project results showing a Pacific-wide big eye tuna stock in contrast to the heterogeneity found for yellowfin tuna stocks and the findings that data from the Cross Seamount tagging program indicate distinct residency patterns for bigeye and yellowfin tuna. For FY 98, PFRP will be requesting a budget of 3 million dollars. Bob Skillman presented the NMFS Honolulu Laboratory report of activities related to pelagic fisheries research, including JIMAR projects and WPacFIN programs, with a description of anticipated future activities (i.e. biology, stock dynamics, economics and bycatch). A WPacFIN data workshop was held in February 1997. A brief discussion of problems and solutions relative to the WPacFIN program in Guam ensued. **The SSC requested that David Hamm, WPacFIN Program Coordinator, present an update on WPacFIN activities at the next SSC meeting.**

Rick Deriso briefly summarized the outcome of the most recent World Meeting on Bigeye Tuna. Of the 14 participants three were associated with the Western Pacific Council's SSC. A review of the current status of bigeye from Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans revealed that this species may be the most valuable of the tropical tuna species but the most neglected in terms of research and biology. Future meetings on bigeye tuna are being planned.

Bob Skillman reviewed the outcome of the recent Second International Swordfish Symposium which was followed by the first meeting of the swordfish subcommittee of the Interim Scientific Committee (ISC). The proceedings of the symposium will be available in about 7 months. The focus for discussions was on techniques for improving biological input for stock assessment, fisheries oceanography and habitat, and resource assessment and monitoring.

John Hampton presented information on the 2nd Multilateral High Level Conference on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific. This forum for the negotiation of tuna fisheries management will be held in Majuro in June and include ministerial and high level diplomatic representation from coastal and island states, and the distant water fishing nations (DWFNs). A desirable

outcome of the meeting would be a direction that scientists organize an interim scientific body to coordinate tuna research, stock assessment and data collection in the western and central Pacific region. This interim body could establish the groundwork for a more formal scientific advisory structure to be eventually incorporated into a new fisheries management organization or arrangement for highly migratory species in the region.

Cross Seamount interaction issue

Paul Dalzell (Council Staff) briefly summarized the background to the gear interaction issue on the Cross seamount between small boat handliners and longliners, which became a serious problem in the middle of 1996. At the last Council meeting in November 1996, Council staff were directed to collect information on the longline and handline vessels operating on the Cross Seamount and to convene meetings between the various parties to see whether a solution could be achieved to this problem. David Itano summarized the outcome of these meetings and also noted that Pacific Insular Areas Fishing Agreements may have the potential to create similar interaction problems. **The SSC took note of the preferred management option arising from these meetings, specifically that: 'no restrictive legislation of any kind be imposed with fishing open to all gear types throughout the year; the Council explores ways to facilitate the co-existence of both fishing fleets in a way to minimize interaction.' Although this option was preferred by both parties, and the Council staff has already acted to communicate the agreed upon procedures to permit holders; some SSC members noted that the true test of this management option will come in June when longliners are expected to return to the seamount.** David Itano noted that given the high CPUE in the fishery, closer monitoring of the catches including dockside monitoring was needed. Walter Ikehara noted that the Pelagics Plan Team would try to separate out that sector of the fishery for both gear types in the next annual report. **The SSC chose not to comment further except to note that it expected to revisit the issue in the future.**

Pelagic fisheries data reporting

Mike Laurs summarized progress to date on the development of a NMFS pelagic fisheries database model. The model is based on the ORACLE database management system. The longline logbook data and observer logbook data have already been entered into the database. SSC members were invited to attend a demonstration of ORACLE and the NMFS web page after the conclusion of the SSC meeting.

Status of bycatch/incidental take assessments

Albatross progress report. Beth Flint of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) presented initial estimates of the incidental take of albatross in the Hawaii-based longline fishery for 1996 as well as counts of the nesting pairs on the breeding colonies in the NWHI. The take estimates were computed by Pierre Kleiber of NMFS using data collected by the SW Region's observer program. The 1996 take of Black-footed albatross at approximately 1,150 birds was 54 % of the 1994 and 64 % of the 1995 estimates. The estimated take of Laysan albatross was approximately 600 birds, which is 60 % of the 1994 and 31 % of the 1995 estimates. No takes of the endangered Short-tail albatross have been observed in the fishery, although two individuals have been observed in the NWHI.

While the lower take estimates and trends in breeding pair counts are encouraging, interpretation of the lower take rates and the impact of the takes is problematical without

population dynamics models of these species. **Therefore, the SSC recommends that the USFWS present to the Council a description of previous population assessments of albatross species and convene a workshop to develop assessment models for evaluating the impacts of takes as was recently done by the NMFS for marine turtles. The SSC further recommends that fishermen be encouraged to use mitigation devices and to return carcasses and leg bands from dead birds, under conditions which assure anonymity and protection from legal redress**.

Albatross research proposals. Studies have been conducted in the waters of Australia and New Zealand on the effectiveness of alternative means of preventing interactions of longline gear with seabirds. **Beth Flint presented a draft solicitation for proposals to conduct a similar study of the effectiveness of alternative means of preventing interactions of longline gear with albatross in the Hawaii longline fishery. The SSC believes that the proposal has merit and encourages the USFWS and the Council to proceed with the project and identify potential sources of funding**.

Deployment of bird pole on the Townsend Cromwell

The SSC commends the USFWS and the NMFS for the cooperative work being conducted on the Townsend Cromwell, where records of the effectiveness of a bird pole are being made during experimental longline fishing.

Turtles

Pierre Kleiber of the NMFS Honolulu laboratory presented preliminary estimates of the take of marine turtles in the Hawaii-based longline fishery. While estimates might change somewhat after further analysis of the data, it is clear that the estimated takes and mortalities of Loggerhead and Olive Ridley turtles in 1996 exceed the allowable limits. **The SSC recommends that the Council makes a request to NMFS that a presentation be made at the next SSC meeting describing the process used to determine the existing biological limits used in the current consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The SSC further recommends that the Honolulu Laboratory and the SWR Observer Program work together to adopt data collection and archival practices that would facilitate the linking of logbook and observer data**.

Sharks

Paul Dalzell called attention to a directory prepared by contractors Craig Heberer and Mike McCoy on sources of information on shark fishery data from fishing nations in the insular tropical Pacific and the Asian Pacific rim. Two distant-water fishing nations, Japan and Korea, were not very forthcoming with information.

Mike Laurs, Director of the NMFS Honolulu Laboratory presented estimates of shark catches in the Hawaii longline fishery. The 1996 catch of 101,000 sharks was about the same as in 1995. The portion of the catch released was 56.7 % (down somewhat from 1995) and 43.0 % of the catch was finned, with less than 1 % of sharks landed whole. Longline vessels targeting mainly swordfish accounted for most of the reported catches, which consisted mainly of blue sharks, and a very small proportion of the catches was retained. In contrast, operations targeting tunas accounted for a much smaller proportion of the reported catch but a much higher proportion was retained for finning.

Determination of TALFF for PIAFAs

The SSC considered several methods for setting the total allowable level of foreign fishing (TALFF) for pelagic fisheries that are under consideration for Pacific Insular Area Fishery Agreements (PIAFAs). At this stage, **the SSC recommends that a non-numeric approach to setting the TALFF be adopted. It further recommends that the TALFF for each Pacific Insular Area be reviewed in the pelagics annual report.** To assist in the process of selecting a TALFF it was suggested that an examination of historical levels of foreign fishing in each PIA be undertaken. Contact with the FFA, which is coordinating similar efforts with its member countries, should be maintained.

MSFCMA requirements

Potential additions and changes to the pelagics FMP to bring it into line with requirements of the re-authorized Act were summarized by Paul Dalzell, based on a systematic review of the existing FMP, with amendments, compared against criteria of the act:

1) Definitions. In addition to the generic definitions in the Act, there are a further 21 definitions in the FMP, none of which cover Bycatch, Fishing Sectors , Essential Fish Habitat, Fishing Communities and Overfishing. Adding the missing definitions is apparently a relatively straightforward editorial task.

2) Bycatch has received considerable attention in the FMP, particularly recently, and it appears that any changes will be few and minor.

3) Fishing sectors will have to be revised for all aspects of pelagic fisheries. In addition to sectors specified in the act, the pelagics FMP should identify and deal with some sort of 'subsistence' sector. Considerable compositional and editorial work will be required. For the commercial sector, the available database is very comprehensive for longliners but less so for small boats. For charter boat fishing and especially for recreational fishing, the database is poor, and separate treatments of these sectors will be sketchy.

4) Essential Fish Habitat will have to be drafted largely from primary sources as the FMP contains only limited descriptions of pelagic habitat.

5) Fishing communities discussion will also have to be drafted from primary sources. The FMP must define the communities engaged in and supported by the fisheries and assess the effects of management on each.

6) Overfishing definitions might be reconsidered. However, given the nature of the fisheries in the plan, it seems likely that the basic definitions will not change much. Language should probably be added to prescribe in advance some course of corrective action to be taken in case overfishing is observed in the fishery. For most of the fisheries involved, this could probably be no more specific than, for example, if SPR drops below a defined threshold, consultations would be initiated with management bodies of the other jurisdictions with which these stocks are shared, in an effort to create an effective joint management regime for the entire stock.

Small pelagics scoping

Paul Dalzell reported briefly on the status of examining some efforts to help determine the desirability and feasibility of managing fisheries for small pelagic species. An initial exploration of the status of the opelu and akule fisheries in Hawaii is planned using catch data from Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources, to be analyzed by a research associate under the supervision of PFRP Director, John Sibert. **The SSC fully supports continued collection and analysis of data on akule and opelu, and the**

synthesis of the available literature on these small pelagic species which also support fisheries in CNMI, Guam and American Samoa.