

WPRFMC Enforcement Reports: *Satellites May Track Foreign Fishing Vessels*

The Western Pacific Council is considering whether or not to require all foreign fishing vessels to participate in a vessel monitoring system (VMS) as a condition for entry into U.S. ports in the Western Pacific Region. The entry restriction would include the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) adjacent to all U.S. Pacific islands (the area from 3 to 200 nautical miles offshore of most islands).

Under a VMS program now in place in Hawaii, the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Coast Guard are monitoring Hawaii-based tuna longline vessels with satellite devices. A transceiver on board each vessel receives position information from satellites, then transmits a signal through another satellite system and land lines to a base station in Honolulu. The system allows enforcement agents to continuously monitor the identity and location of each vessel, and is used to enforce no-fishing zones around the Hawaiian Islands.

Foreign fishing is not currently allowed in the U.S. EEZ, and foreign fishing vessels that enter U.S. ports are not now required to carry VMS units. A proposed amendment to the Magnuson Act could require, as a part of ongoing "Pacific Fishery Agreements" (PFAs), all vessels fishing within the U.S. EEZ, or that of U.S. Pacific Insular Areas, to carry monitoring systems.

In an era of reduced budgets for Coast Guard and NMFS enforcement agencies, VMS is a potent management tool. At a relatively low cost, it can identify the name and nationality of individual fishing vessels. A universal requirement for VMS on foreign vessels has long-term positive and negative implications.

From a **positive** perspective, a VMS could result in:

- Enhanced enforcement of existing fishing rules by knowing the identity and location of foreign vessels in U.S. waters at all times;
- Greater equity in enforcement, as the rules are applied to foreign and domestic fishing vessels (although only Hawaii-based longliners, not all domestic vessels, are now required to carry VMS); and
- The potential to transmit catch and effort data in real time.

There are potential **negative** implications, however, including:

- Foreign fishing vessels, in order to avoid being a part of the VMS or similar controls, may avoid the waters surrounding U.S. Pacific islands. This could reduce the information that scientists need for fish stock assessment that is gained by fishing in these areas.
- Foreign vessels might make fewer port calls in American Samoa (AS), Hawaii, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI). This would result in serious economic impacts to those areas. If a VMS is required, many vessels may avoid these ports for supplies, crew rest, and catch transshipment. These ports could suffer a serious decline in fisher-related revenues if foreign fishing vessels stop calling there.

One thing is certain--a VMS requirement for foreign vessels would provide the Western Pacific Council and its affiliate agencies with unprecedented information on fishing activity within its jurisdiction.