

Briefing Document for Public Scoping Hearings



Scoping Hearings for Precious Coral Fisheries Environmental Impact Statements

The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is preparing environmental impact statements (EIS) on the Federal management of the fisheries for precious coral fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) waters of the Western Pacific Region. The EIS analysis includes all activities as authorized under the Precious Coral Fishery Management Plan and all amendments thereto. The scope of the EIS analysis examines the impacts of precious harvest on the marine environment and, among other things, protected species. Analysis will also consider associated ecosystem effects. To provide for public input into the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts that the EIS should consider, the Council is scheduling scoping hearings throughout the region.

Scoping for the precious coral EIS are scheduled to be held in CNMI on February 16 and in Honolulu on February 24 and March 2, 2000. In addition to holding the scoping hearings, the Council will also accept written comments on the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts considered in the EIS.

The EIS, when completed, will present an overall picture of the environmental effects of fishing as conducted under the FMPs. It will also include a range of reasonable management alternatives and an analysis of their impacts in order to define issues and provide clear basis for choice among options by the public and the Council. The analysis will include an assessment of the biological, social and economic impacts that result from regulation of the bottomfish, seamount groundfish and crustacean fisheries of the Western Pacific Region, including license limitation, present and potential controls on effort, harvest levels, location, timing, and methods of fishing. The

effects on the marine environment, associated species and ecosystem, including interactions with protected species, will be assessed. Impacts associated with status quo management (i.e., continuation of fishing as currently conducted) will be presented and compared to situations simulating limits on fishing areas and/or gears over all or parts of the management area. Possible alternatives to the current conduct of the fishery include limited access and area and/or seasonal closures modifications, gear restrictions and/or modifications, and requirements for documenting incidental interactions with protected species. As there are an infinite number of alternatives, the EIS will not consider detailed alternatives for every aspect of the FMP. Therefore, the principal objective of the scoping and public input process is to identify a reasonable set of management alternatives that, with adequate analysis, will clearly define critical issues and provide a basis for choice among the alternatives.

Other issues that the EIS will address include: essential fish habitat (EFH), target and non_target species of fish, fish that are discarded, marine mammals (Hawaiian monk seals and cetaceans), other protected species, and ecosystem effects in the Western Pacific Region. In addition, the EIS will summarize, interpret and contain predictions for socio_economic issues associated with conduct of the fishery on the following groups of individuals: (1) Those who participate in harvesting the fishery resources and other living marine resources, (2) those who process and market the fish and fishery products, (3) those who are involved in allied support industries, (4) those who consume fishery products, (5) those who rely on living marine resources in the management area either for subsistence needs or for recreational benefits, (6) those who benefit from non_consumptive uses of living marine resources, (7) those involved in managing and monitoring fisheries, and (8) fishing communities.

Summary of the Precious Corals FMPs:

The management plan for the precious corals fishery of the Western Pacific Region was implemented in 1983. In the FMP, precious coral beds are treated as distinct management units because of their widely separated, patchy distribution and the sessile nature of individual colonies. The beds are classified as Established,

Conditional, Refugia or Exploratory. Established Beds are ones for which appraisals of MSY are reasonably precise. To date, only Makapuu bed has been studied adequately enough to be classified as Established. Conditional Beds are ones for which estimates of MSY have been calculated by comparing the size of the beds to that of the Makapuu bed and then multiplying the ratio by the yield from the Makapuu bed. It is assumed that ecological conditions at the Makapuu bed are representative of conditions at all other beds. Five beds of precious corals are classified as Conditional, all of which are located in the EEZ around Hawaii. Refugia Beds are areas set aside for baseline studies and possible reproductive reserves. No harvesting of any type is allowed in those areas. The single Refugia Bed that has been designated—the Westpac bed—is also located in the EEZ surrounding Hawaii. Exploratory Areas are the unexplored portions of the EEZ. Separate Exploratory Permit Areas are established for Hawaii, American Samoa and Guam.

The FMP permits the use of only selective gear in the EEZ around the Hawaiian Islands. Quotas are established for pink, gold and bamboo coral populations in the Makapuu bed and in the Conditional Beds. Pink coral harvested from the Makapuu bed, the Keahole Point bed and the Kaena Point bed must have attained a minimum height of 10 inches.

The FMP establishes a procedure for redesignating coral beds from Exploratory to Conditional and from Conditional to Established as new beds are located and more catch/effort data become available that will allow more precise determinations of sustainable yields.

Amendment 1 applies the management measures of the FMP to the Pacific Island Areas other than Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands by incorporating them into a single Exploratory Permit Area; expands the managed species to include Midway deep-sea coral; and outlines provisions for experimental fishing permits designed to stimulate the domestic fishery.

Amendment 2 defines overfishing with respect to Established Beds as follows: An Established Bed shall be deemed overfished with respect to recruitment when the total spawning biomass (all species combined) has been reduced to 20% of its unfished condition. This

definition applies to all species of precious corals and is based on cohort analysis of the pink coral, *Corallium secundum*.

Amendment 3 created framework procedures to modify established measures and establish new measures. The amendment notes that the Council operates in an environment of great uncertainty with regard to information on precious coral stocks, therefore frame work allows the Council greater flexibility and quicker response time.

Amendment 4 addressed the Sustainable Fisheries Act requirements including establishing a new definition for overfishing based on MSY, addressing bycatch, reporting by fishing sectors, and defining essential fish habitat.