WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Press Release

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Scientists Address Managing and Monitoring of Hawaii LonglineTuna Quotas, Management of Hawaii Non-longline Pelagic Fishery

KAILUA-KONA (21 July 2009) The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)—chaired by Dr. Charles Daxboeck today at the King Kamehameha Beach Hotel in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii—discussed monitoring of bigeye tuna catches in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (i.e., east of 150 deg. W longitude) by US longline vessels measuring over 24 meters (about 79 feet) in length. All but one of these vessels belong to the Hawaii fleet. This year they are limited to 500 metric tons of bigeye in the Eastern Pacific under the international conservation management measures imposed by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission. An improved monitoring method is needed to avoid a repeat of the 2006 season, when the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) miscalculated the fleet's catch and closed the fishery in the Eastern Pacific when only 60% of the quota had been reached. To improve future monitoring, the SSC recommended that observers on these vessels provide weekly catch reports to NMFS and that fish logbooks be fast-tracked to calculate the fleet's cumulative catch level. Currently, catch reports are submitted by the observers after a vessel completes its trip, which typically last three weeks. The SSC will fine-tune this recommendation and others they considered today when the three-day meeting concludes tomorrow.

Among the other recommendations considered today were ways to allocate the Hawaii longline quota for bigeye tuna in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, i.e., west of 150 deg. W longitude) and management of non-longline pelagic fishing at Cross Seamount and NOAA weather buoys. International conservation measures by the Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission requires the Hawaii fleet to reduce its catch in this area by 10% (i.e., to 3,763 metric tons) in 2009, 2010 and 2011. If fishing remains on its current trend, Hawaii's 2009 quota may be reached in mid-November, when the high-demand holiday season for tuna begins.

The SSC also heard reports today about trends in the Hawaii longline catches over the past decade that indicate that the North Pacific subtropical pelagic ecosystem is changing. Catch rates for apex predators—such as blue shark, bigeye and albacore tunas, shortbill swordfish and striped marlin—have declined from 3% to 10% annually, while rates of mid-trophic species—such as mahimahi, sickle pomfret, escolar and snake mackerel—have increased from 6% to 18% annually. NMFS researcher Jeffrey Polovina, PhD, who presented the study, also reported that the areas of surface water with low chlorophyll productivity in the North and South Pacific and Atlantic Oceans have expanded by 6.6 million km^2 or by about 15% from 1998 through 2006. This expansion is consistent with global warming scenarios that have been modeled, but greatly exceeds those modeled predictions.

Another report of interest, presented by NMFS scientist Donald Kobayashi, PhD, examined the importance of ocean slicks off the Kona Coast of Hawaii as habitat for important insular and pelagic species—including billfish—in their early life-history stages.

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The SSC recommendations will be considered by the Council when it meets July 22 to 25, 2009, also at the King Kamehameha Beach Hotel in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Fishermen and other interested members of the public are invited to attend the meeting and provide testimony. They are also invited to the Fishers Forum "Marlin on the Menu," 6:30 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, July 23. The Forum will cover the past, present and future of the marlin fishery in the US Pacific islands from multiple perspectives and seek recommendations on managing this fishery.

The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council was established by the US Congress to manage fisheries in the exclusive economic zone around Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the US Pacific remote island areas. The management process is bottom-up with recommendations from fishermen and other interested persons moving through advisory groups to the SSC and then to the Council. Decisions made by the Council are transmitted to the US Secretary of Commerce for final approval.

Complete agendas for these public meetings and additional information on the major items under consideration by the SSC and the Council may be found at the Council's website at www.wpcouncil.org or by contacting the Council by phone (808) 522-8220, fax (808) 522-8226 (fax), or email info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov.

Scientific and Statistical Committee Members

Dr. Stewart Allen (NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center), Dr. Judith Amesbury (Micronesian Archeological Research Services), Dr. Brian Bowen (Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology), Dr. Paul Callaghan (University of Guam retired), Dr. Frank A. Camacho (University of Guam), Dr. Milani Chaloupka (University of Queensland), Dr. Charles Daxboeck (BioDax Consulting Tahiti), Dr. Richard Deriso (Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission), Dr. John Hampton (Secretariat of the Pacific Community), Dr. Pierre Kleiber (NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center), Dr. Molly Lutcavage (University of New Hampshire), Dr. James Parrish (Hawaii Cooperative Fishery Research Unit retired), Dr. Dan Polhemus (Hawaii Department of Land & Natural Resources), Dr. Marlowe Sabater (American Samoa Marine & Wildlife Resources Department), Dr. Craig Severance (University of Hawaii at Hilo retired), Dr. John Sibert (Pelagic Fisheries Research Program), Dr. Robert Skillman (NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center retired) and Mr. Michael Trianni (Northern Mariana Islands Division of Fish & Wildlife).