



Informational Sheet

Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

Importance of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) to Hawaii's Fisheries

- The NWHI accounts for two-thirds of the exclusive economic zone around Hawaii and 83 percent of its coral reef habitat.
- This area has been fishing grounds for Hawaii inhabitants since pre-contact with Western societies. Commercial fishing has occurred there since as early as 1917.
- The State of Hawaii strongly opposed designation of the NWHI as a wilderness area within the National Wilderness System because it opposed any prohibition of commercial fishing. The designation was twice proposed to Congress.
- In the 1960s, the Governor's Task Force on Oceanography recognized that the fishery resources of the main islands were being subjected to considerable fishing pressure and recommended exploration and development of marine resources in the NWHI. Subsequently, in response to a recommendation by the Governor's Advisory Committee on Science and Technology, the State of Hawaii, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) signed a Tripartite Cooperative Agreement and undertook a five-year survey and assessment of the NWHI resources.
- Today, nearly half of the bottomfish and most of the lobster that is commercially harvested annually in Hawaii comes from the NWHI (annual landed values from the NWHI are \$1 million and \$1.2 million, respectively).
- Under limited entry programs and harvest guidelines, the total bottomfish and lobster harvest from the 11,500 km² of reef in the NWHI are extremely conservative, i.e., about 415 tons, or 0.035 tons/km² of reef. By comparison, sustainable reef fishery yields in the Asia-Pacific region typically average about 5 to 7 tons/km² and have been documented as high as 20 tons/km² in several island locations.
- The sustainable NWHI bottomfish fishery harvests healthy stocks of red and pink snappers. These fish are featured dishes in the Hawaii regional cuisine, which local restaurants cater to tourists and residents. These red fish hold special cultural significance to the people of Hawaii, particularly at New Years. By comparison, stocks of the same species around the main Hawaiian Islands are depleted.

- Because of their healthy state and relative abundance, the NWHI bottomfish average 8 to 15 pounds and are affordable at about \$4 to \$6 per pound. By comparison, main Hawaiian Island bottomfish average 2 to 8 pounds and are high priced at about \$8 to \$15 per pound.
- Industry representatives say that closure of the NWHI fishery will cause imports of foreign fish to increase. This will degrade the quality of fish sold in Hawaii, a state whose per capita consumption of fish is several times greater than that of the continental United States. The increased imports could negatively impact the marketing of locally caught fish and could financially support economically damaging fisheries elsewhere.
- The Governor's fishing village, which has cost the state \$12 million in infrastructure to date, will depend on fresh, locally caught fish.
- The precious coral fishery (potential annual landed value \$1 million, of which half would come from the NWHI) and bioprospecting are potential future industries in the NWHI with great economic potential for the state of Hawaii.

Management of the NWHI

- **Department of Interior:** USFWS administers the eight islands and atolls from Nihoa to Pearl and Hermes Reef as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). USFWS defines the refuge administrative boundaries as the land area of these eight islands and atolls as well as waters and submerged lands extending seaward to 10 fathoms, except at Necker, where the boundary extends to 20 fathoms. USFWS also administers Midway Atoll (a US possession) as the Midway Atoll NWR. It defines the boundaries of this refuge as a 22 x 22-square-mile area around the atoll. USFWS has a long-term contract with Midway Phoenix Corp., which operates ecotourism and plane refueling businesses on the atoll.
- **State of Hawaii:** Of the 10 islands and atolls in the NWHI, only Midway is not a part of the State of Hawaii. The State of Hawaii claims jurisdiction over fisheries in waters 0 to 3 miles from shore surrounding these 9 islands and atolls. The state does not recognize the USFWS claim to submerged lands in the Hawaiian Islands NWR. The State manages Kure Atoll as a state wildlife sanctuary.
- **Department of Commerce:** Fisheries in federal waters, from 3 to 200 nautical miles around the nine NWHI islands and atolls that are part of the State of Hawaii and from 0 to 200 nautical miles around Midway Atoll, are regulated by NMFS, based on fishery management plans recommended by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council. Regulations are enforced by NMFS and the US Coast Guard.

Existing and Draft Fishery Management Plans (FMPs)

- NWHI fisheries in federal waters are regulated by four fishery management plans (FMPs) established in the 1980s. A fifth FMP, for the coral reef ecosystem, has been under development since the mid 1990s.
- **Bottomfish FMP:** Through a limited-entry program, only 10 vessels are permitted to bottomfish around Necker and Nihoa (two permits are reserved for eligible Native Hawaiian communities) and only seven vessels are permitted to bottomfish in the remaining NWHI waters. Vessel size restriction and mandatory logbook and observer programs and protected species workshop are additional management measures. This fishery does not have a significant impact on protected species, according to NMFS.
- **Crustacean FMP:** Through a limited entry program, only 15 lobster vessels are permitted to fish in the NWHI. About 9 vessels actually operate in the area. Management measures include an 8-month seasonal closure (actual fishing takes place only one to two months), annual quota with bank-specific harvest guidelines, area closures 0 to 10 fathoms around all islands and 0 to 20 miles around Laysan Island, and mandatory logbook and observer coverage. Closure of the fishery in 2000 is based on lack of confidence in the population model and concern about recruitment of 2-year-old lobsters at Necker; it is not a result of overfishing or concern about potential impacts on protected species.
- **Precious Coral FMP:** Gear restrictions and quotas apply for the seven known beds as well as all the unknown precious coral beds. The Wespac bed in the NWHI is a no-take refugia; a harvest moratorium is being proposed for the French Frigate Shoals bed. Except for a single trip in 1989, precious corals have not been exploited in the NWHI since foreign vessels were removed from the area in 1976.
- **Pelagics FMP:** Longline fishing within 50 nautical miles of NWHI is prohibited. Mandatory vessel monitoring system, logbook and observer programs are in place. Use of inappropriate and environmentally harmful gear is prohibited. Mandatory protected species workshop requirement and demersal longline prohibition are awaiting approval from Secretary of Commerce.
- **Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP:** Coral reef ecosystems in federal waters of the US Pacific Islands, including the NWHI, are considered near pristine and under low impact. The plan has been developed as a precautionary measure as demand for and ability to harvest coral reef resources in federal waters of US Pacific Islands could increase in the future. The draft FMP contains provisions for 14 percent of the coral reef habitat in federal waters of the NWHI to be designated as no-take zones and for additional areas to be reserved for Native Hawaiian use. It also contains gear restrictions, permit and reporting requirements, vessel grounding insurance requirements, a framework measure to allow for rapid management adjustments to changing conditions, proposed non-regulatory actions (e.g., establishment of a formal process to coordinate existing FMPs to ensure ecosystem

management takes place; facilitate consistent state and territorial level management of coral reef resources; public education outreach) and Sustainable Fisheries Act requirements (fishing sectors, communities, bycatch, overfishing and essential fish habitat).

The President's Initiative

- President Clinton on May 26, 2000, announced an executive order to develop a national system of marine protected areas to be coordinated by a national Marine Protected Area Center.
- At the same time, the President announced a memorandum on protection of U.S. coral reefs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), which directs the Departments of Commerce and the Interior to conduct the following tasks among others:
 - Working cooperatively with the State of Hawaii and consulting the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, develop recommendations within 90 days for a new, coordinated management regime to increase protection of the ecosystem and provide for further sustainable use.
 - Address whether appropriate stewardship for the submerged lands and waters of the NWHI warrants exercise of presidential authority to extend permanent protection to objects of historic or scientific interest or to protect the natural and cultural resources of this important area.
 - Conduct “visioning sessions” within the 90-day period, which would provide opportunities for public hearing and comment to help shape the final recommendations.
- The visioning sessions were conducted in Washington, DC, on July 21 and in Hawaii from July 24 to August 1, with the public comment period ending on August 2. During these sessions environmental groups recommended that 60 to 100 percent of the NWHI be zoned as no-take. Fishermen and fishing industry representatives recommended continued regulated, sustainable fisheries under the Council process.
- Following the visioning sessions, the Department of Commerce and the Interior reportedly submitted separate recommendations to the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The reported recommendation by Interior was to designate the NWHI as a National Monument under the Antiquities Act. Commerce reportedly had a different recommendation. The CEQ is said to have worked with the two Departments and national non-governmental environmental organizations to draft an executive order to establish a NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve.