



WESTERN
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Press Release

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Swordfish Longline Fishery Reopened in Hawaiian Waters

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council and NOAA Fisheries hosted a press conference to announce the reopening of the swordfish longline fishery. Present at the press conference were the Chair of the Council, Roy Morioka and the Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries, Dr. William Hogarth. The Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds introduced a distinguished panel of experts on turtle conservation and bycatch reduction, which included John Watson of NOAA Fisheries, Martin Hall of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Kimberly Davis of the World Wildlife Fund and Eric Gilman of the Blue Ocean Institute.

Swordfish targeting using shallow (< 30 fathom) sets by Hawaii-based longliners has been prohibited by federal regulations since April 2001. This ban was implemented because the bycatch of loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles by Hawaii-based longliners was thought to be too high for the populations to sustain. Most of the turtle bycatch was taken by shallow setting swordfish longliners, which bore the brunt of management regulations designed to minimize this bycatch.

Fortunately, research led by John Watson with US longliners in the Atlantic has shown that the combination of 18.0 circle hooks and mackerel type bait can reduce the catch of leatherback turtles by 67% and loggerhead turtles by 92% compared with fishing with J-type hooks and squid bait. In November last year, Western Pacific Council recommended a conservative reopening of swordfish longline by the Hawaii fleet using this gear combination. However the Council set an annual limit on the number of shallow sets (2,120 sets), or half of the annual number of sets before the swordfish closure, to be divided up among fishermen expressing an interest in targeting swordfish. The new management measure also imposes “hard caps” on the number of leatherback (16) and loggerheads (17) that can be caught in any one year, and 100% observer coverage to ensure that all interactions are monitored and reported. If either cap is reached, the fishery will be closed for the year regardless of how many sets remain unused.

Council Chair, Roy Morioka, noted that “the reopening of the swordfish fishery is the product of the partnership of industry, government, and environmental non-government organizations (NGOs)”. He applauded them for successfully developing a fishing regime that complements and fulfills the challenging goals of economically viable longline fishing with minimal impact on turtles.

Dr Bill Hogarth stated that “while we are reopening the swordfish fishery, it is being done with the utmost caution and with significant safeguards to ensure continued sea turtle conservation. These include the strict caps on the number of sea turtle interactions and a limit on swordfish sets that can be made each season”. Like Morioka, he praised all the individuals concerned who had worked on developing the swordfish management measures, including the Council, NOAA Fisheries and environmental NGOs.

Kimberly Davis, Deputy Director of the Marine Conservation Program of the World Wildlife Fund in the United States, added that research on the effectiveness of the circle hooks and other measures to minimize turtle bycatch needs to commence in the Hawaii longline fleet as soon as possible. She added, "the lessons learned in the Atlantic must be tested, refined, and shared in the Pacific as quickly as possible." Ms. Davis also underscored the international dimension of the problem of longline bycatch, "It is essential that we reduce bycatch not only in the U.S. fleet, but in all fishing fleets fishing in the Pacific. WWF is hopeful that improvements adopted and refined in the Hawaii swordfish fishery will be instrumental in transforming other fleets." Finally, she emphasized that reducing fisheries bycatch must be part of a broader conservation initiative, "Ultimately if we are to save turtles, we need to protect them everywhere they live - on beaches as well as in the water."

Eric Gilman, Fisheries Bycatch Program Manager for the Blue Ocean Institute, added that successes had already been achieved in perfecting methods to reduce seabird bycatch by Hawaii-based longline vessels, through a fishing industry-NGO-government partnership. This effort led to a simple but very effective method of longline deployment called “side-setting”. Gilman said, “the next step is to establish a formal broad trial of side-setting in the Hawaii fleet to confirm that side-setting will both nearly eliminate bird mortality and provide substantial operational and economic benefits.” Gilman also acknowledged that, “the reopened Hawaii longline swordfish fleet will employ the best available turtle bycatch mitigation methods, but as is the case with side setting, additional research and commercial demonstrations are needed to refine, improve and confirm their effectiveness.” Gilman was, “cautiously optimistic that seabird and sea turtle mortalities can be reduced to insignificant levels in Pacific longline fisheries with further study.” Gilman also echoed the remarks of Kimberly Davis that an international approach is critical due to the highly migratory nature of seabirds and sea turtles, calling on the U.S. government and industry to play a leadership role to catalyze bycatch mitigation research in other countries.

The Council is the policy-making agency for fisheries management in federal waters (3-200 miles offshore) around American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, and the US Pacific Island possessions - an area of nearly 1.5 million square miles. For more information, call (808) 522-8220, fax (808) 522-8226; e-mail info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov, or log on to www.wpcouncil.org.