WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Press Release
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Feds, Researchers and Industry Tackle Pacific False Killer Whale Issue

HONOLULU (15 April 2009) More research and management are needed to understand and resolve human impacts on the large dolphin species known as false killer whales and other cetaceans species in the US Pacific islands. That was the conclusion of the Marine Mammal Advisory Committee of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, which met last week in Honolulu.

Most of the Committee's 11 recommendations focus on two false killer whale stocks found within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters around Hawaii—the small near-shore Hawaii insular stock and the larger offshore Hawaii pelagic stock. The Hawaii insular stock corresponds to the population found within the longline exclusion zone, which spans out to 25 to 75 miles offshore depending on the season and location. The Hawaii pelagic stock corresponds to the population in the EEZ where longline fishing is allowed. The Hawaii pelagic stock moves in and out of the EEZ waters and is the same or closely related to the larger Eastern North Pacific (ENP) population of false killer whales.

The false killer whale is not considered threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, nor is it considered depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). However, it is protected by the MMPA within US EEZ waters.

According to the draft 2008 stock assessment by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the estimated annual interaction rate of the Hawaii pelagic stock with the longline fishery is less than six animals. The optimum sustainable population for the Hawaii stocks is not known. There is also no data available on the current productivity rate or on the current population trend of the Hawaii stocks. Furthermore, additional injury and mortality of false killer whales is known to occur outside of the EEZ by US and international longline operations, and the potential effect on the Hawaii pelagic stock is unknown. There are 125 vessels in the Hawaii-based longline fishery and about 6,000 foreign longline vessels operating in the Pacific Ocean.

Last week's meeting also revealed anecdotal information that Hawaii's false killer whale populations may additionally be impacted by interactions from recreational and nearshore shortline fisheries, deliberate shootings as a result of interactions with small-scale fishers, reduced prey availability, pollutants and other factors.

Regarding the Hawaii insular and pelagic false killer whale stocks, the Committee made the following research and management recommendations:

- Update the US EEZ abundance estimate by stock, additional satellite tagging of both stocks, photo identification, genetic and acoustic studies, and bycatch by stock.
- Assess the use of shortlines and potential impacts around the main Hawaiian Islands; and monitor and regulate shortline fishing in federal waters.
- Research potential causes of the decline of the Hawaii insular stock, such as undocumented bycatch, ingestion of hooked fish, reduced prey availability, deliberate shootings and pollutants.

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- Extend population assessment and bycatch estimates into international waters.
- Encourage cooperative research with the Hawaii Longline Association and other pelagic fisheries to provide researchers with platforms for obtaining information on marine mammals and interactions with fishing gear.
- Provide fishers and observers with information on photographing false killer whales and other cetaceans and encourage them to take photographs to aid in photo identification of individuals.
- Encourage the Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument to support research to better understand false killer whale and other cetacean populations in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

For other parts of the Western Pacific Region, the Committee recommended the following:

- Throughout the Region, research, assess and model false killer whale foraging, life history and prey habitat.
- Encourage the national marine monuments in Palmyra and Kingman Reef to support research to understand false killer whales and other cetacean populations.
- Deploy observers on 40 percent of the American Samoa longline fishery trips for one year to achieve greater statistical power.
- Replicate in American Samoa the survey that was conducted in Hawaii on longline fishers' knowledge of whale depredation events and any potential methods to avoid depredation and, if possible, include the independent Samoa and the Cook Islands in the survey.

The MMAC members include Robin Baird, Cascadia Research Collective; Marilyn Dahlheim (absent), NOAA National Marine Mammal Laboratory; Karin Forney, NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center; Erin Oleson, NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center; Russell Ito (absent), NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center; Geoff McPherson, Queensland Northern Fisheries Research Center; and Paul Nachtigall, Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology. Additional presentations were delivered by Lisa Van Atta, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office; Michelle Yuen, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office; Jamie Marchetti, NOAA Observer Program; Marti McCracken, NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center; and Victoria (Tory) O'Connell, Coastal Marine Research.

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council is the federal agency responsible for managing fisheries in the offshore waters of the US Pacific Islands. The Council has successfully reduced longline interactions with sea turtles and seabirds by 90 percent. For more information, contact the Council at (808) 522-8220, (808) 522-8226 (fax), info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov or www.wpcouncil.org.