


Pacific fishing interests oppose Obama's plan to expand marine reserve

By **Juliet Eilperin** June 30  [Follow @eilperin](#)

In this undated photo released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, a vibrant giant clam is shown at Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in the Line Islands. (AP Photo/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, James Maragos)

When
President

Obama announced two weeks ago he intended to [expand federal protections around seven islands and atolls in the central Pacific Ocean](#), many environmentalists hailed the move as an important step for conservation. But the main group overseeing fishing operators in Hawaii and three U.S. territories in the region declared Monday it opposes the proposal, on the grounds that it would hurt the U.S. fishing industry.

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The [Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council](#)--composed of fishing industry representatives as well as some state and federal officials--helps establish fishing policy for both commercial and recreational operators in Hawaii as well as the territories of American Samoa and Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In a statement released Monday afternoon, members of the quasi-governmental agency said they would oppose any additional limits on commercial fishing in the area.

President George W. Bush used his executive authority to establish the [Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument](#), which now encompasses almost 87,000 square miles, in 2009. Obama is now contemplating widening those boundaries to cover nearly 782,000 square miles of federal waters, which would be off-limits to fishing, energy exploration and other activities. Right now the designation extends 50 miles out from shore; it could be extended as far out as 200 miles from shore around each of the U.S. territories.

The statement, which was approved by the council's executive committee, argues this broad expansion would deprive American fishing operators of an important resource. "U.S. fishermen, including those in the Pacific, already abide by the strictest fishing regulations in the world, and this plan further

inhibits their economic survival," they wrote, adding it would yield "few, if any, ecological benefits from the restrictions."

However Marine Conservation Institute founder and chief scientist [Elliott Norse](#), who has lobbied for the expansion, challenged the council members' assertion that "there is no scientific evidence indicating that the U.S. purse seine and longline fishing vessels operating in the offshore waters" outside the current monument "are impacting seabird populations."

"Fishing for tunas mean there are fewer tunas," Norse said in an interview, adding that the millions of seabirds that nest and forage in the area depend on the area's tuna population. "We would like there to be more tunas in this ecosystem, because they play an important role in that ecosystem."

White House Council on Environmental Quality spokeswoman Keri Fulton wrote in an e-mail the administration has identified the area around the monument "as a special area of focus for future marine protections because it contains some of the most pristine tropical marine ecosystems in the world and is uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change."

"Before making decisions about the geographic scope

and details of these future marine protections, the Administration will seek out the input of commercial and recreational fishermen, scientists, conservation experts, elected officials, and other stakeholders," Fulton added.

[Michael Conathan](#), who directs ocean policy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, noted the monument "is very much a work in progress" since the administration will be taking comment on its plan.

"They talk about this as if it's a done deal," Conathan said of the fishery council's statement.

There is also an effort underway in Congress to deny Obama the authority to create a national marine monument under the 1906 Antiquities Act, which presidents from both parties have invoked over the past century. Last week Rep. Steve Southerland, a fierce critic of the administration's ocean policies, introduced a bill that would require congressional approval for any new national monument.