

# Tuna, Conservation and the Race for the U.S. Senate

U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz and U.S. Rep. Hanabusa discuss the Obama administration's proposal to create the largest marine sanctuary in the world in Hawaii's backyard.

JULY 24, 2014 · By NICK GRUBE

On June 17, when President Barack Obama announced he wanted to create the world's largest marine sanctuary in the south-central Pacific Ocean, many in Hawaii had the same question:

What about the ahi?

Obama's proposal would expand the protections around several nearby islands, meaning certain sects of Hawaii's fishing fleet might not be able to dip their nets or cast their lines in those waters anymore.

It also meant that Hawaii's longliners, who pull in tuna, marlin and other species, could feel an unexpected pinch if Obama uses his executive powers to cordone off the area to commercial fishermen.

The gravity of the situation has not been lost on the Democratic candidates running to fill out the final two years of the late U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye's six-year term.


Both U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz and U.S. Rep. Hanabusa have said they worry about the impacts to one of the state's most iconic industries.

*Joel Abroad-Flickr*



Schatz has said he's already reached out to senior presidential advisor John Podesta, one of the administration's leaders charged with carrying out the plan, to find out exactly what's at stake for Hawaii.

"We are strongly supportive of conservation, but we also believe that our longline fishery is sustainable and should not be caught up in an



*Fresh ahi after the fish auction, Pier 38, Honolulu,  
August 2013.*

effort to crack down on the bad actors throughout the rest of the Pacific,” Schatz told Civil Beat in a recent interview.

“Our fishery in particular and our longline fleet — which is not enormous — is really important to our culture in terms of ahi. It (also has) a real economic impact.”

The senator, who has been endorsed by Obama, is generally open to the president’s idea of expanding the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, which was first established by George W. Bush in 2009.

The monument protects 50 square miles around seven uninhabited, U.S.-controlled islands and atolls. Under Obama’s proposal that area could be expanded to 200 square miles to protect fish, coral and other marine life.

Companion components of Obama’s plan to protect ocean resources include combatting black-market seafood fraud and studying the effects of ocean acidification as it relates to climate change.

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Pacific Regional  
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But where Schatz expresses optimism over the administration’s conservation goals, his opponent casts a wary eye.

“Before the president takes this action I would like to have a better sense as to why,” Hanabusa said. “What’s the end game? What’s the purpose?”

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## Protecting Papahānaumokuākea



Hanabusa is particularly worried about how Obama’s proposal will affect fishing around the Hawaiian islands.

Specifically, she said she wants assurances that the sanctuary expansion will not involve Papahānaumokuākea, which George W. Bush designated as a monument in 2006.

The congresswoman said Podesta has told her that Obama’s plan doesn’t currently include Papahānaumokuākea, but because the president still has ultimate authority over what becomes a monument she will remain skeptical.

“The question we asked is Papahānaumokuākea being expanded,” Hanabusa said. “If Papahānaumokuākea is expanded to 200 miles, if you look at where it is, it will possibly cover as much as a portion of Oahu. But it would definitely cover Niihau and Kauai. That’s a problem.”

To date there’s still been no indication from anyone involved that Obama’s proposal will include the chain of islands northwest of the main Hawaiian isles. The proposal only includes Wake, Baker, Howland and Jarvis Islands as well as the Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll.

But even if Papahānaumokuākea is spared — and, again, it’s not currently a part of president’s proposal — Hanabusa said designating the south-central Pacific islands under the monument status could still hurt the state’s commercial fishing fleet more than she’s willing to accept.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Obama’s proposal, if implemented to its fullest extent, could affect 164 licensed vessels that are part of the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery.

FISHERY	NUMBER OF PERMITS	TOTAL ECONOMIC VALUE FOR 2013	5% OF THE ECONOMIC FOR 2013
PRIA Troll	6	~\$9 million	\$450,000
Hawaii Deep-set Longline	164	~\$80 million	\$4 million
WCPO Purse Seine	40	~\$318 million	\$15.9 million

NOAA estimates that in 2013 fishery had an economic value of approximately \$80 million. Should the marine sanctuaries in the south-central Pacific be expanded, the federal agency projects a 5 percent loss in value, or about \$4 million.

NOAA projects that the two other fisheries affected by the proposal — the Pacific Remote Island Troll and the Western Central Pacific Ocean purse seine fleet — could also lose more than \$16 million dollars of its estimated \$327 million value.

“There are different implications as to what and how it’s going to affect Hawaii in terms of the fishing industry that we have,” Hanabusa said. “The most troubling part about it is not really knowing, and so a lot of people are guessing at what it means and how (the sanctuary) is going to expand.”

## An Unfair Burden?



One group that has voiced loud opposition to Obama's marine sanctuary proposal is the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, known as Wespac.

Two weeks after the president said he wanted to use his power to "protect some of our most precious marine landscape," Wespac released a 10-page memo denouncing the plan for placing a regulatory and economic burden on U.S. fishermen in the Pacific, specifically Hawaii and American Samoa.

Among other things, the group argued that the expansion of the monument would do little to rebuild fish stocks, that it would be difficult to enforce and that it would not have the ecological benefits intended.



*U.S. Rep. Colleen Hanabusa at Civil Beat on March 21, 2014*

Wespac also argued that the U.S. would lose even more of its already diminishing competitive advantage with foreign vessels because U.S. fisherman would be banned from working in large swaths of American waters.

"President Obama's continued aspiration for a strong legacy concerning environmental issues is commendable, but his plan for the U.S. Pacific Islands unfairly penalizes the

U.S. fishermen and seafood consumers who depend on this resource," the Wespac memo states.

"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."

The group suggested that if the administration moves forward with the monument expansion that it allow commercial fishing by U.S. vessels to continue in the waters around the current monument.

It also supported amending the Antiquities Act of 1906, which gives Obama the authority to designate monuments.

Doing this, Wespac argues, would "ensure that no more waters are taken from U.S. fishermen in the Pacific Islands in the name of conservation and for the legacy of a President."

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Wespac’s criticisms shouldn’t be too surprising. The group, which is often at odds with conservationists, spoke out during the Bush administration’s campaign to designate marine monuments in the Pacific in 2006 and 2009.

In fact, Wespac’s opposition to the sanctuaries was so prolific that the New York Times editorialized about it in 2008, noting that the group is “notorious among environmental groups as a chronic enabler of reckless commercial fishing.”

The editorial board even quoted Westpac Executive Director Kitty Simond as saying that Bush’s proposals at the time were punishment of the “brown and yellow people” of American Samoa and the Northern Marianas.

Simond was unavailable for comment this week, but Wespac Senior Scientist Paul Dalzell stood by his group’s assessment of Obama’s proposal.

He called the sanctuaries little more than “paper parks” because the remoteness means islands and atolls are not subject to “human pressures” associated with more populated areas.

“If you look at the creation of marine national monuments by the two administrations they have been exclusively in the West Pacific region,” Dalzell said.

“That would suggest that because we have small populations and limited representation in Congress we are much easier. We’re the line of least resistance when it comes to creating these monuments.”

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## Staying in the Loop



Both Hanabusa and Schatz made clear that Hawaii’s fishermen — and U.S. longliners in general — must be part of any discussion going forward.

Hanabusa tends to put her trust in Wespac in terms of management of the Pacific fisheries.

She said the group has done a good job monitoring the commercial fishing industry, and that fishermen are at a disadvantage when it comes to competing with international fleets that don’t have to abide by the same rules.

“That’s what a lot of the frustration has been with our fishermen is that they’re under heavy scrutiny,” Hanabusa said. “It’s almost like we’re scrutinizing our fishermen but (for) the real violators there’s no consequence.”

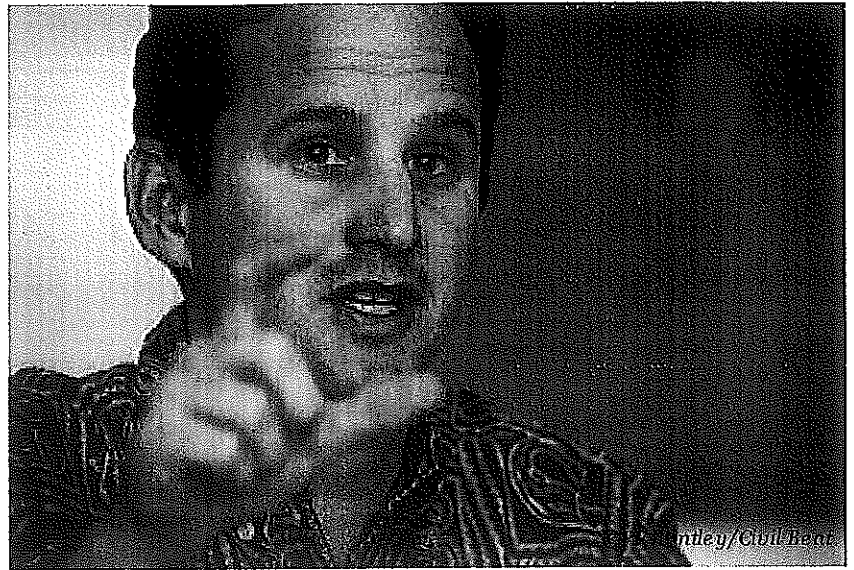
Schatz echoed this sentiment, saying that Hawaii’s longliners seem to be operating in a sustainable manner.

At the same time he reiterated that it’s important to remain diligent as the administration molds its final proposal, which the president can enact through his executive branch powers.

“The statute under which they’re operating pretty much gives total flexibility to accommodate local needs, technical knowledge, (and) the latest research,” Schatz said.

“Our job as the administration moves forward with conservation efforts is to make sure that our local industry has a voice here and doesn’t get treated in the same category as pirates.”

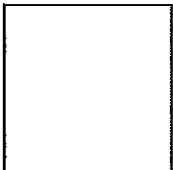
A town hall meeting on Obama’s proposal is scheduled for Aug. 11 at the Ala Moana Hotel. That’s two days after the Aug. 9 primary.



*U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz at a Civil Beat on March 20, 2014.*

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## About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

**Nick Grube**  

Nick Grube is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can reach him by email at [nick@civilbeat.com](mailto:nick@civilbeat.com) or follow him on Twitter at [@nickgrube](https://twitter.com/nickgrube).

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## Discussion



*What, if anything, do you think the federal delegation can do to make sure Hawaii's interests are taken into consideration as the Obama administration moves ahead with its ocean conservation*