

The Cross Seamount Fishery: Contemporary Synopsis of the Fishery and Fishery Participant Interviews



December 2014



Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813

A report of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813

Prepared by Ellary Tucker Williams, Fisheries Data and Integration Project Consultant for
the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

© Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council 2014.
All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

ISBN 978-1-937863-52-4

CONTENTS

1 Introduction	1
2 Fishery Overview	1
3 Interview Responses	2
3.1 Frequency and Motivations	2
3.2 Entries and Exits in the Fishery	3
3.3 Cross Seamount, NOAA Weather Buoys, and P-FADS	3
3.4 Marketing of Product	3
3.5 Fishing Methods	4
3.6 Conflicts and Barriers	4
3.7 Other Comments	5
4 Conclusion	5
Appendix: Interview Questions	7

1 INTRODUCTION

This report, as well as its companion—*A Statistical Analysis of the Cross Seamount Fishery from January, 2009–July, 2014* (a report to the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council)—was undertaken for the Council in support of its efforts to understand the current operation of and trends in the fishery. The work was conducted between September and December 2012 and examined participants, species landed, and existing and emerging issues of potential management concern. This report is broken into two sections. The first section summarizes trends in the fishery over the past decade. The second section describes the outcomes of several interviews with Cross Seamount fishermen.

2 FISHERY OVERVIEW

The Cross Seamount, approximately 150 nautical miles to the southwest of the Big Island of Hawai‘i, has an associated fishery of great interest to the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council. The fishery produces a mix of economically valuable fish, such as yellowfin and bigeye tuna, along with large amounts of other fish year round. It is fished by a small number of commercial fishermen who are specifically equipped and experienced for the conditions at the Cross Seamount. Commercial fishermen have assisted in the collection of fishery data for the past five and a half years. These data have been analyzed recently to create a current snapshot of the fishery.

The number of licensed fishermen fishing the Cross Seamount has increased from nine in 2009 to 14 in 2013. The number of trips made annually to the Cross Seamount increased 355.5 percent from 64 trips in 2009 to 224 trips in 2013. Data for 2014 are still under development.

The type of fishing and gear used at the Cross Seamount is quite varied and shows high levels of ingenuity. Fishermen tend to use a variety of methods and a multitude of gear types depending on the season, their target catch and what is biting. The gear types include shortline, troll, tuna handline, vertical line, deep-sea handline and a hybrid method, which combines two or more of these methods. The data suggest that the hybrid method is most commonly used amongst the Cross Seamount fishing community, but it is difficult to say due to few licensees reporting and concerns with data confidentiality.

Yearly yield produced by the Cross Seamount fishery has increased drastically since 2009. The total number of fish caught increased 305 percent from 17,395 in 2009 to 53,108 in 2013. The total number of pounds (lbs) harvested increased from 312,073 lbs to 1,076,344 lbs (344 percent) over the same timeframe. This drastic increase in yield is most likely due to increased fishing effort, efficiency and improved methods. However, although overall yield has increased, the average individual weight of fish harvested from the Cross Seamount has decreased. Peak average weight was 26.9 lbs in 2010, and decreased 15 percent to 20.2 lbs in 2013.

Individual species harvested from Cross Seamount have shown similar trends of decrease in average fish weight concurrent with an increase in the total number of fish caught and pounds harvested. Tombo (albacore tuna) and striped marlin are the only species that have shown an increase in average weight. Bigeye tuna, yellowfin tuna, monchong (pomfret), mahimahi

(dolphin fish), aku (skipjack tuna), blue marlin, walu (oilfish), ono (wahoo), swordfish, short-nosed spearfish and kaku (barracuda) all decreased in their average weight. The species most consistently landed at the seamount are bigeye tuna, yellowfin tuna, monchong and mahimahi.

The Cross Seamount is able to produce fish year round. Bigeye tuna, yellowfin tuna and mahimahi are most frequently caught from December to March. Monchong typically congregates from September to March. Walu peaks between August and January, ono and tombo from July to September, short-nosed spearfish from December to February, kaku from May to September, aku from September to February, blue marlin from June to September, striped marlin in May, and swordfish in June, October and February.

This data is only for licensed commercial fishermen and does not take into account noncommercial fishermen who may fish at the seamount. There is also a tendency for fishermen to underreport their catch, which should be taken into consideration. To better understand the fishermen's perspectives about the status of the fishery at the Cross Seamount, attempts were made to contact known Cross Seamount fishermen.

3 INTERVIEW RESPONSES

To complement gear and species data for the Cross Seamount fishery, several fishermen known to currently fish the Cross Seamount were interviewed to better understand the state of the fishery from the participants' points of view, as well as elucidate any issues which might interest the Council. Of the six fishermen known to currently fish the Cross, three were to successfully contact and interviewed. One interview was conducted in person, and the other two were conducted via telephone. Several unsuccessful attempts were made to contact the remaining three known Cross Seamount fishermen.

This section summarizes the fishermen's responses to 20 interview questions (see Appendix) as well as other shared knowledge deemed important by the fishermen and the interviewer. As promised to them, the identities of the three fishermen interviewed are confidential; thus, they are referred to as Fisherman A, Fisherman B and Fisherman C.

3.1 Frequency and Motivations

When asked how often and why the fishermen fished the Cross Seamount, the responses were fairly similar across all three respondents. Fisherman A stated that he makes regular weekly trips to the Cross, and the fishing trips are multiple days in length. Fishermen B used to fish the seamount 300 days a year, but, due to poor prices for the fish as of late, he only fished about 200 days in 2014. Fisherman C fishes about 10 days a month, equating to approximately 120 days a year, but he also stated that in previous years he had fished more. This year has been particularly slow. All three fishermen originally started fishing out at the Cross Seamount because it was lucrative and producing large amounts of fish consistently; additionally, there were no or only a few people participating in the fishery. Fishermen B and C both said they feel somewhat restricted to the Cross Seamount fishery because their boats are designed and outfitted for that seamount so they are less able to fish successfully in other locations.

3.2 Entries and Exits in the Fishery

The interviewees were asked who they knew to make regular or occasional trips out to the Cross. Fisherman A identified two vessels along with two fishermen. Fisherman B stated that there are five fishermen who consistently fish the Cross Seamount, but he was unwilling to give their names. Fisherman C listed six fishermen. Fisherman A said he was unaware of any recent newcomers to the fishery or fishermen who have recently left it; it is consistently the same people every year. Fisherman B, however, said that seven boats had attempted to enter the fishery in the last three years but were unable to make a profit and, therefore, left. He also said that two boats come and go regularly from the fishery, but he was unwilling to identify them. Fisherman C identified the most recent fisherman to enter the fishery in the last 6 to 7 years. This same fisherman also indicated that it is not necessarily the fisherman who leaves the fishery; it could be the boat owner. Once a boat owner sees other boats catching a decent quantity of fish, he/she hires a crew and sends the boats out. The people who are the core group at the Cross have not left because they have no other means of income. Lastly, Fisherman C identified one vessel that tried to enter the fishery but was forced to leave.

3.3 Cross Seamount, NOAA Weather Buoys and Private Fish Aggregating Devices

Next, the fishermen were asked a series of questions regarding whether fishermen who fished on the Cross Seamount fished elsewhere, such as the NOAA weather buoys, and if Cross Seamount fishermen made use of the private fish aggregating devices (P-FADs). Fisherman A named seven vessels as only fishing at the Cross Seamount and nowhere else. He also stated that Cross Seamount fishermen do, in fact, fish around NOAA Weather Buoy 3 if fish are actively biting, but the buoy has not been very active in the past year. Fisherman A said that they do not make use of P-FADs. Fisherman B, however, said there are no boats that fish only the Cross Seamount; everyone who fishes the seamount also fishes the weather buoys. He did not want to give further information on other fishing locations due to suspicion that the government wants to close areas to fishing. Fisherman C also stated that Cross fishermen fish at Weather Buoy 3 on their way to and from the seamount. He stated that four fishermen primarily fish the seamount but are not limited to it. Both Fisherman A and B said that the Cross Seamount fishermen do not use P-FADs because they are illegal. Fisherman C went a little more in depth, explaining that there would be conflicts with the P-FAD owners if the Cross Seamount fishermen fished the P-FADs. He also stated that the Cross Seamount fishermen dislike the use of P-FADs because they are destructive, drive the price of fish down and disturb migratory patterns. Both Fisherman A and B said they were unaware of anyone who fished the weather buoys but not the seamount. Fisherman C stated that the only people who fish the weather buoys but not the seamount are small charter boats from Kona.

3.4 Marketing of Product

There are variations of how the Cross Seamount fishermen market and sell their catch. According to Fisherman A, fishermen are marketing and selling their fish on Facebook through pages such as Hawai'i Island Fish Market. Fishermen also email their land connections who then alert buyers when the boat will be arriving; the fish are then sold directly from the boat.

Fisherman B stated that there is a website called ahiplus.com, which sells only Cross Seamount fish and markets it as family-owned, hand-caught, local fish. He also said the use of Facebook is a new and different method used. Fisherman C did not identify any new or different selling or marketing strategies.

3.5 Fishing Methods

As with any fishery, methods and gear preferences change over time. Fisherman A said that he used to use ika-shibi and dangle methods but now prefers shortline. Fisherman B agreed that technological improvements have improved fishing, but he did not want to explain any further. Fisherman C also indicated there has been development in ways to target and catch larger fish. He previously used dangling, but now fishes at night with varying types of deep jigs using live bait and squid. These shifts have occurred because the fish are getting harder to catch, and the fishermen are focusing more on quality of fish over quantity. Both Fishermen A and C indicated the use of satellite call-up buoys as novel gear.

3.6 Conflicts and Barriers

Historically, there has been conflict between the longliners and Cross Seamount fishermen. According to the three Cross fishermen interviewed, there is no current conflict that occurs between them and the longliners at the Cross Seamount—that conflict was settled years ago and the longliners know not to fish at Cross Seamount. According to Fisherman A, Cross Seamount fishermen view themselves as a community or family and have agreed amongst themselves on rules and are able to self-regulate. Any conflict with the longliners, according to Fishermen B and C, occurs in the market. The longliners flood the market with fish and bring prices down, hurting the small Cross Seamount fishery. Fisherman B explained how longliners control the market and are able to push other fishermen out of business by not allowing them to purchase ice or supplies if they view them as a threat. Fisherman C explained how the longliners have much more influence at the auction block through politics and big business power. Their fish is sold first; once the Cross Seamount fish are up for sale, the majority of the buyers have already gone home.

All three fishermen agreed that the Cross Seamount fishery has a boom and bust cycle. According to Fishermen A and C, the cycle is natural and due to fish seasonality and migration. Fisherman A specified that El Nino years are particularly terrible for the Cross Seamount. Both Fisherman B and C also indicated the boom and bust cycle in the market with the prices they receive for fish. Fisherman B stated that the fishing has improved due to less fishing pressures, while Fisherman C stated that fishing at Cross Seamount has not been good for a while.

According to Fishermen A and B, the biggest barrier to fishing Cross Seamount is knowing how to properly fish the seamount. Fishermen need to know how to fish around other vessels, manage the tricky and unique currents, and be able to deal with the natural elements at the seamount while continually communicating with the other boats to avoid disaster between boats and gear. These are the trade secrets that keep the same fishermen returning. Fishermen B and C also indicated that it is expensive to fish at the Cross, and, with the price of fish being poor, they are barely able to cover their basic expenses. Fisherman B even said that some days it is not worth leaving the dock. According to Fishermen B and C, these barriers have become

greater over the years due to increased operational expenses and lower fish prices. Fisherman B said the price for fish today is lower than 10 years ago, and Fisherman C said that the price for fish has been cut in half over the past two years.

Both Fishermen B and C indicated the recent shift in the market towards imported gassed (carbon monoxide) fish has had a great impact on them. Imported gassed fish are depressing 'ahi (bigeye and yellowfin tuna) prices in the local fish market, which is their target market. Fisherman C indicated a need for proper labeling and increased public awareness to at least give consumers a choice, while Fisherman B stated that gassed fish should be banned for health reasons and to assist the local Cross Seamount fishery. Fisherman A said that the conflicts and barriers regarding the Cross Seamount have remained consistently the same. The biggest change to the fishery has been the decrease in the number of boats at the Cross Seamount, from 20 in 1994 to six or seven today.

The fishermen were asked if they participated in any other fishery. Fisherman A said he participates in the longline, bottomfish and high seas troll fisheries. Fisherman B said that because fish prices were so bad throughout Hawai'i this year, he went to New England to fish for cod. Fisherman C indicated that he is thinking about going back to charter boat fishing.

3.7 Other Comments

Once the interview was complete, each fisherman was asked if there were any topics that were not brought up that he/she felt was important. Fisherman A expressed a need for a special permit for only Cross Seamount fishermen that would allow them to use two sections of 2-mile long longlines in a 5- by 5-mile square grid. The reasoning is that, when a tuna hits the shortline gear, its reaction is to dive and twist, causing the shortlines to hook on the bottom and become entangled. This can be catastrophic for all the other vessels' gear in the water. The 2-mile long sections do not have the same response when the tuna strike. Cross Seamount fishermen are forced to set illegal longlines to avoid this issue. Fisherman A also said that they do not report this illegal longlining amongst Cross Seamount fishermen because it helps to keep everyone's gear from becoming twisted and off the bottom. Fisherman A stated that he has informed his contacts at NOAA about the illegal fishing and violations of the Convention on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean and the Endangered Species Act at Cross Seamount and no citations have been issued, indicating that NOAA is complacent with such activities. With a special permit for 2-mile long longlines at the seamount, it would no longer be illegal, and fishermen would be taught how to comply with the Endangered Species Act as part of the permit process.

Fisherman B expressed concern that the fishery logs that fishermen are required to submit are an ineffective management tool. The government's reaction is too slow; the system is unable to manage and make changes fast enough to be effective. Fisherman C stated that the longline fishing quotas need to be enforced because the industry has too many boats and it is harming the small boat fishermen.

4 CONCLUSION

The Cross Seamount fishery is a small, complex and potentially very productive and

lucrative fishery. The annual yield has increased, most likely due to improved fishing methods and effort. However, it seems that the average weight of fish has been decreasing and the seasonality of the seamount affects when various species are present and being caught. The fishermen's perspectives are important. They know firsthand what is happening at the Cross Seamount, from what fish seems to be most prevalent and/or if the fish are biting elsewhere near the Cross, to conflicts amongst fishermen, issues in the market and the people who comprise the fishery.

APPENDIX

Cross Seamount Fishery Synopsis Project

2014

Fishermen Interview Component

Interview Questions

Interview Number:

Date:

Time:

Interview Location:

1. How often do you fish the Cross Seamount?
2. Why do you fish the Cross Seamount?
3. What made you start fishing at the Cross Seamount?
4. Who make regular or occasional trips to the Cross Seamount?
5. Do you know of anyone who has recently:
 - a. Newly entered the Cross Seamount fishery?
 - b. Left the Cross Seamount fishery?
 - c. Re-entered the Cross Seamount fishery after being away from it for awhile?
6. Do you know anyone who fishes only on the Cross?
7. Are there other areas that Cross Seamount fishermen particularly like to fish, other than at the seamount?

8. Do Cross fishermen fish around the NOAA weather buoys?
9. Do Cross fishermen make much use of the P-FADs?
10. Does you or anyone you know fish the weather buoys but not Cross?
11. Do you or anyone you know market or sell fish caught at Cross any differently than fish caught elsewhere?
12. Has the way that you fish at Cross evolved over time? Why and how?
13. What, if any, interesting or novel gear do you use when fishing at the Cross Seamount (for example, sonar buoys on shortlines)?
14. Conflict with longliners was a problem in the mid to late 1990s. How about now?
15. Are there any new conflicts (with fishermen other than longliners)?
16. Some have said the fishery has a bit of a boom and bust cycle to it. What is your perspective?
17. What are the biggest barriers to fishing the Cross Seamount?
18. Have any of these barriers changed much over time (i.e., become much more or much less important)?
19. What would you say have been the biggest changes to the fishery since you have been involved with it?
20. Do you participate in any other fishery (longline, bottomfish, etc.)?