

Costs will outweigh benefits of larger marine sanctuary

By Mike Markrich

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Recently it was revealed that the likely cause of the hepatitis A outbreak in Honolulu came from tainted imported frozen seafood.

The proponents of the expanded Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument plan have been busy with an expensive public relations campaign that extols all the good that will come from closing off an ocean area the size of Texas near Honolulu, the nation's largest per capita fish market.

What they are not telling you is that to make up for the lack of supply here when the ban goes into effect, more fish will be imported to meet demand, and the health risks with limited quality controls and no transparency will be borne by local residents and tourists.

For many years, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), where the monument is located, has been the subject of two powerful and mutually hostile narratives. On the one hand is the view of the local fishing industry, the local fishing council and their political allies in the visitor industry.

Their position is that because all commercial fishing in U.S. waters is highly regulated, there was never a need for the fishing ban and takeover by the federal government of the NWHI. No overfishing takes place.

The local fishing industry has a long history, backed largely by a Japanese fish tradition of ensuring the quality and safety of the fish it sells.

On the other hand are federal officials and large environmental organizations and their local political allies. They believe that expanding federal control would allow more fish to be born in the protected area regardless of what happens outside it. In their mind, the benefits of protecting this vast area from overfishing outweigh any negative input from frozen seafood imports.

In the past, the local fishing industry and its Democratic allies could count on Democrats such as the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye to oppose the takeover of state waters by federal agencies.

But in 2006, this changed when Republican Gov. Linda Lingle facilitated the creation with President George W. Bush of the entire NWHI as the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. A memorandum of understanding between the state and federal governments was signed.

Critics at the time said the unlimited closing of an area the size of California without any compensation for the loss of alternative uses to Native Hawaiians indefinitely was a deal no Alaskan or other Native American group would have ever agreed to. They believe that to expand this to an area nearly five times as large will exacerbate the income inequality their community suffers.

If the area where fishing is banned is expanded, Waikiki restaurants will still consume large amounts of fish. But ever more will come from the Asian companies fishing the waters of poor island states, who lack the financial means to protect or monitor them. Many foreign fishers work in slave-like conditions.

The expansion of the monument would be a well-meaning effort. Unfortunately, it would do nothing to solve the problems of overfishing in the Pacific region, quality control for consumers or social justice.

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