



Press Release

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NEW TURTLE LIMITS RECOMMENDED TO RE-OPEN SWORDFISH FISHERY

HONOLULU (15 April 2019) Federal fishery managers on Friday concluded its nearly year-long effort to provide relief to the Hawai‘i-based shallow-set longline fishery for swordfish. The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council at its 177th Meeting held on April 12, 2019, recommended revised fleet-wide sea turtle interaction limits along with new individual trip-based interaction limits. A recent draft Biological Opinion (BiOp) developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) provided managers with a basis for a new limit for loggerhead and leatherback turtle interactions, potentially allowing the fishery to be re-opened this year. The fishery closed this year on March 19 due to interactions with 17 loggerhead turtles, all of which were released alive.

Every vessel for every trip of the Hawai‘i-based shallow-set longline fishery has a federal observer that ensures accurate monitoring of interactions with protected species. The North Pacific loggerhead population is growing annually at 2.4 percent, but a court settlement in May 2018 reduced the fishery’s allowable interaction with the species from 34 to 17. The cap of 17 may be modified when NMFS finalizes the new BiOp for the fishery and issues new regulations based on the Council’s recommendations.

In June 2018, the Council recommended annual limits of North Pacific loggerhead and leatherback turtle interactions consistent with what was set forth in the upcoming BiOp. The draft BiOp released on March 28, 2019, requires NMFS to set an annual limit of 36 loggerhead turtles and 16 leatherback turtles for this fishery. The Council recommended these limits to be implemented under regulations for the Council’s Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) and further recommended that the existing turtle interactions occurring from January 1 to March 19, 2019, apply toward the new limits, essentially allowing the fishery to re-open.

The Council maintained its June 2018 recommendation to implement an individual trip limit of five loggerhead turtles, and additionally recommended a trip limit of two leatherback turtles. If a vessel reaches either of the limits during a fishing trip, the vessel must return to port but would be allowed to target swordfish again on the next trip. The Council’s recommendation was in contrast to annual vessel-based limits of six loggerhead turtles and two leatherback turtles that NMFS is proposing in the draft BiOp, which would prohibit vessels from targeting swordfish for the remainder of the year if they reached their individual limit. The Council found that this measure would create undue economic hardship to the fishery while providing little additional turtle conservation benefit.

Roger Dang, whose family has fished with longline vessels out of Hawai‘i for more than 30 years, criticized the vessel limit proposed in draft BiOp. “This is not the solution,” he said. A vessel limit of two leatherback interactions would deter vessels from entering the shallow-set fishery to target swordfish and thus diminish the fleet’s ability to provide swordfish for the US domestic market, he explained. “Ecuador in the last year, from 2017 to 2018, increased its

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production by almost 100 percent, Costa Rica 80 percent, and they're both bigger fisheries than the Hawai'i product," Dang added. "The majority of the swordfish product in the US right now is the South American product."

"The Council's recommendation today, although highly restrictive on the fleet, will allow Hawai'i vessels to continue supplying fresh, highly monitored swordfish while supporting industry-led solutions to addressing rare sea turtle interactions in the fishery," said Eric Kingma, executive director of the Hawai'i Longline Association.

Dean Sensui, the Council's Hawai'i vice chair, added "The actions taken by the Council today ensures that Hawai'i's fishermen continue to provide fresh sustainable seafood to the community and at the same time adds additional protection for sea turtles in the Western Pacific."

The Hawai'i shallow-set longline fishery operates in waters North of Hawai'i and catches swordfish that is sold both in Hawai'i and the US Mainland. It produces approximately half of the US domestic swordfish.

For the agenda and background materials on the meeting, go to www.wpcouncil.org or contact the Council at info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov or (808) 522-8220.

The Council was established by Congress in 1976 and has authority over fisheries seaward of state waters of Hawai'i, Guam, American Samoa, the CNMI and the Pacific remote islands. Recommendations that are regulatory in nature are transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and then implemented by NMFS and enforced by NMFS and the US Coast Guard.

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council: Secretary of Commerce appointees from nominees selected by American Samoa, CNMI, Guam and Hawai'i governors: Archie Soliai, StarKist (American Samoa) (chair); Michael Duenas, fisherman (Guam) (vice chair); John Gourley, Micronesian Environmental Services (CNMI) (vice chair); Christinna Lutu-Sanchez, commercial fisherman (American Samoa) (vice chair); Dean Sensui, film producer (Hawai'i) (vice chair); Michael Goto, United Fishing Agency (Hawai'i); McGrew Rice, Ihu Nui Kona Sportfishing (CNMI); Edwin Watamura, Waialua Boat Club (Hawai'i). Designated state officials: Suzanne Case, Hawai'i Department of Land & Natural Resources; Chelsa Muna-Brecht, Guam Department of Agriculture; Raymond Roberto, CNMI Department of Lands and Natural Resources; Henry Sesepasara, American Samoa Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources. Designated federal officials (voting): Michael Tosatto, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office. Designated federal officials (non-voting): RADM Kevin Lunday, USCG 14th District; Michael Brakke, US Department of State; Brian Peck, USFWS.