WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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Scientists Recommend Setting Annual Catch Limits for Uku in Main Hawaiian Islands, Options for American Samoa Bottomfish Management and Protected Species Mitigation Measures

HONOLULU (12 June 2020) The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council concluded its three-day virtual meeting yesterday. Key outcomes addressed the main Hawaiian Islands uku stock assessment, American Samoa bottomfish rebuilding plan and measures to mitigate incidental interactions of the Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries with protected species.

The uku stock in the main Hawaiian Islands is not overfished nor subject to overfishing according to a NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center 2020 assessment.

Recommendations made by the SSC on these and other matters will be considered by the Council when it meets June 23-25, 2020, by web conference (Webex) with host sites at the Hilton Guam Resort & Spa, Chuchuko Room, 202 Hilton Rd., Tumon Bay, Guam; Hyatt Regency Saipan, Royal Palm Ave., Micro Beach Rd., Saipan, CNMI; and Department of Port Administration, Airport Conference Room, Pago Pago International Airport, Tafuna Village, American Samoa. Instructions on connecting to Webex, agendas and briefing documents will be posted at www.wpcouncil.org/meetings-calendars.

Main Hawaiian Islands Uku Stock Assessment

The uku (*Aprion virescens*; grey snapper) stock in the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) is not overfished nor subject to overfishing according to a NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) 2020 assessment presented at the SSC meeting. The uku fishery is considered to be data-rich, using a fishery-independent measure of biomass, length and local life history information gathered from the commercial and non-commercial sectors. The 2018 spawning stock was estimated to be 1.8 million pounds, which is 2¾ times the calculated sustainable threshold of 663,705 pounds. The SSC accepted the assessment as the best scientific information available and recommended that the Council direct staff to convene the P* and Social Economic Ecological and Management Uncertainties working groups. The analyses from these groups quantify uncertainties and set the acceptable biological catch and specify the annual catch limits for the main Hawaiian Islands uku fishery for fishing years 2021-2024.

American Samoa Bottomfish Rebuilding Plan

In contrast to the data-rich MHI uku fishery, the American Samoa bottomfish fishery is data-poor. This data-limited situation has persisted for decades and culminated with a 2019 stock assessment that said the American Samoa bottomfish stock was overfished and subject to overfishing. National Marine Fishery Service (NMFS) notified the Council of its obligation to end overfishing immediately and develop and implement within two years a plan that would rebuild the overfished stock within 10 years. This fishery harvests multiple species of varying depth range and has diverse life history characteristics for which information is sparse and borrowed from other areas. Data sources are only from creel surveys that estimate total catch and the commercial receipt book system that captures fish sold to the market.

The SSC deliberated the different scenarios to reduce overfishing and rebuild the stock. The very low catch projections from the assessment do not allow for a viable fishery with a catch limit projected to be

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2,000 pounds and in order to rebuild within 10 years, the catch has to be further reduced to 1,500 pounds. The SSC recommended that the Council work with American Samoa to develop management options and explore effort and biological limits and area management.

The SSC also discussed the cultural significance of the bottomfish fishery and recommended that the bottomfish rebuilding plan include cultural harvest in the offshore banks for deep-water snappers. American Samoa is a Magnuson-Stevens Act-designated fishing community that is widely recognized as having a unique ability to adapt to technological change while maintaining strong cultural resilience, roots and identity through the practice of Samoan custom and the Samoan way known as fa‘a Samoa.

The SSC emphasized that closing the fishery means that no new information is generated that can be used in the next stock assessment. With the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection efforts have been reduced with unknown consequences on the quality of data that will represent fishing year 2020.

Reasonable and Prudent Measures for Protected Species Interactions

The SSC reviewed considerations to mitigate incidental interactions with protected species that may be needed under the ongoing Endangered Species Act consultations for the Hawai‘i deep-set and American Samoa longline fisheries.

The SSC found that interactions with protected species such as leatherback turtles and giant manta rays are rare. Based on available scientific information, including recent sea turtle population assessments, the relative impact to these species from US longline fisheries operating out of Hawai‘i and American Samoa is low compared to foreign fisheries. Any measure implemented in these fisheries is likely to have a limited effect on the population. The SSC recommended that mitigation measures create incentives for industry to report and reduce impacts. Measures should also consider trade-offs of target catch and protected species interactions to avoid unintended consequences.

Data from US longline fleets, highlighted by the SSC for its conservation value, represent one of few reliable sources for the overall number of interactions with protected species. Hawai‘i-based deep-set longline fishery targeting bigeye tuna and American Samoa longline fishery targeting albacore are monitored with 20% federal observer coverage. In contrast, most international fleets operating in the North Pacific Ocean have less than 5% coverage.

Scientific and Statistical Committee: James Lynch (K&L Gates LLP) (chair); Debra Cabrera (University of Guam); Frank Camacho (University of Guam); Milani Chaloupka (University of Queensland); Erik Franklin (University of Hawai‘i, School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology); Shelton Harley (Minister of Fisheries, NZ); Ray Hilborn (University of Washington); Justin Hospital (NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center); David Itano (fisheries consultant); Donald Kobayashi (NMFS PIFSC); Steve Martell (SeaState Inc.); Domingo Ochavillo (American Samoa Dept. of Marine and Wildlife Resources); Ryan Okano (Hawai‘i Division of Aquatic Resources); Graham Pilling (Secretariat of the Pacific Community); Kurt Schaefer (Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission); Craig Severance (University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, retired); Michael Tenorio (CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife; and Michael Seki (ex-officio) (NMFS PIFSC).

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); John Gourley, Micronesian Environmental Services (CNMI) (vice chair); Michael Dueñas, Guam Fishermen’s Cooperative Association (Guam) (vice chair); Edwin Watamura, Waialua Boat Club (Hawai‘i) (vice chair); Howard Dunham, commercial fisherman (American Samoa); Monique Amani, business owner (Guam); Michael Goto, United Fishing Agency (Hawai‘i); McGrew Rice, charter boat captain (CNMI). Designated state officials: Raymond Roberto, CNMI Dept. of Lands and Natural Resources; Suzanne Case, Hawai‘i Dept. of Land & Natural Resources; Chelsa Muña-Brecht, Guam Dept. of Agriculture; Henry Sesepasara, American Samoa Dept. 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 Dept. of State; and Brian Peck, US Fish and Wildlife Service

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