



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

February 24, 2021

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: *Kitty M. Simonds*
Kitty M. Simonds
SUBJECT: Summary of Action Items for the 185th Meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

1. **Wire Leader Regulatory Amendment in Hawai'i Longline Fisheries (Initial Action)**
 2. **US Catch Limits for North Pacific Striped Marlin (Final Action)**
 3. **Environmental Assessment for the Guam Bottomfish Stock Rebuilding Plan (Final Action)**
 4. **Update to the Main Hawaiian Islands Deep-Seven Bottomfish Annual Catch Limits (Initial Action)**
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The 185th meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council will convene March 23-25, 2021, by web conference (Webex) with host sites at the following locations:

- Tedi of Samoa Building Suite 208B, Fagatogo Village, American Samoa
- Cliff Pointe, 304 W. O'Brien Drive, Hagatña, Guam
- BRI Building Suite 205, Kopa Di Oru St. Garapan, Saipan, CNMI

The Webex link is <https://tinyurl.com/185CouncilMtg> (if prompted, enter event number: 177 669 9488; password: CM185mtg).

The Council will consider and may take action on the issues summarized below, including any public comments on them. Written public comments on final action items should be received by the Council's executive director by 5 p.m. (HST), Friday, March 19, 2021, by postal mail, fax or email as indicated below.

Instructions for connecting to the Webex and providing oral public comments during the meeting will be posted on the Council website at <http://www.wpcouncil.org/event/185th-council-meeting-virtual>.

Mail: Ms. Kitty M. Simonds, Executive Director
Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
1164 Bishop St., Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813

FAX: (808) 522-8226

E-mail: info@wpcouncil.org

Summary of Action Items at the 185th Council Meeting

1. Wire Leader Regulatory Amendment in Hawai'i Longline Fisheries (Initial Action)

Most vessels in the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery use steel trace wire leaders in the terminal portion of the branchline between the hook and the weighted swivel to reduce the risk of crew injuries resulting from the flyback of weighted branchlines. Wire leaders also make it difficult to remove the terminal portion of the branch line from sharks or other protected species that cannot be brought on board. Longer trailing gear left on sharks and sea turtles have been shown to reduce post-hooking survivorship. Monofilament nylon leaders may facilitate early release of sharks and improve post-hooking survivorship if they sever the line and escape.

In an effort to reduce impacts to ESA-listed oceanic whitetip sharks and other protected species, the Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) announced at the 184th Council meeting in December 2020 that their member vessels will voluntarily eliminate the use of wire leaders by July 1, 2021, and use monofilament nylon leaders or other similar materials in its place. HLA also announced that it will focus on crew safety and work with vessel owners, captains and crew to utilize best practices, including deploying flyback prevention devices and branchline weight configurations and materials that would minimize flyback. In addition, HLA committed to work with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Council to lead captain and crew training on how to properly implement handling protocols.

The Council commended HLA's comprehensive initiative to further reduce interactions and post-hooking mortality of oceanic whitetip sharks, leatherback turtles and other protected species while also addressing associated crew safety issues. The Council subsequently directed staff to prepare a regulatory amendment to the Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) to evaluate options to prohibit the use of wire leaders in the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery for Council action at the March 2021 meeting.

At its 185th meeting, the Council will review alternatives evaluating the impacts of regulating leader material in the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery, consider taking initial action and may select a preliminary preferred alternative for further analysis.

2. US Catch Limits for North Pacific Striped Marlin (Final Action)

The North Pacific striped marlin stock is overfished, experiencing overfishing and subject to an interim rebuilding plan by an international commission, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), but with no specified catch limits. The Council will consider recommendations in response to the stock status, taking into account the relative impacts of U.S. vessels, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act. At its 184th meeting, the Council took initial action recommending a catch limit for U.S. vessels proportional to a total North Pacific stock-wide catch limit to end overfishing.

The Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) developed catch-scenario projections that would end overfishing and rebuild the stock based on Council FEP and WCPFC criteria. These projections were used to develop and analyze the following alternatives for Council consideration: 1) no action, while considering U.S. impacts under the status quo, 2) annual catch limit (ACL) of 313 metric tons (mt) that corresponds to a 13.4% reduction from 2013-2017 U.S. landings, 3) ACL of 237 mt that corresponds to a 34.4% reduction from 2013-

2017 U.S. landings, and 4) ACL of 457 mt, consistent with previous Council action and WCPFC criteria. These catch limits are for U.S. vessels operating in the WCPFC Convention Area and north of the equator. The Council will also consider timing of the implementation of an ACL, whether it should be applicable for fishing year 2021 or 2022.

At its 185th meeting, the Council may take final action to recommend a preferred alternative for an ACL for North Pacific striped marlin that may proportionally reduce the relative impacts of U.S. vessels and move towards ending overfishing. The Council will consider timing of implementing catch limits and if limits may be applicable for specific years (e.g., until an updated stock assessment is available or within a WCPFC rebuilding plan timeline).

3. Environmental Assessment for the Guam Bottomfish Stock Rebuilding Plan (Final Action)

At its 184th meeting in December 2020, the Council received the options to address the overfishing bottomfish stock condition in Guam based on the 2019 Benchmark Stock Assessment (Langseth et al., 2019). The Council selected 31,000 pounds as its preliminary preferred alternative that mitigates the short-term impacts to the fishery by allowing moderate levels of take while achieving the rebuilding of the stock within the longest timeframe allowed (10 years or T_{max}). Since then, working with the Action Team, Council staff received an updated biomass projection from PIFSC that is consistent with the National Standards 1 (NS1) definition of T_{max} . The new information substantially changed the rebuilding timeframes of the options provided in December 2020. It extended the rebuilding timeframe for the 27,000-pound ACL from four to eight years and the 31,000-pound ACL from six to 19 years. This was due to the recreated catch data to fill in the 2020 and 2021 period to do the biomass projection starting in 2022. The high catch of 37,000 pounds in 2019 increased the three-year average catch, which was further adjusted to be consistent with the catch data used in the assessment. This makes the 31,000-pound alternative no longer compliant with the NS1 guideline to rebuild within 10 years. Council staff will present the draft amendment document with an environmental analysis.

At its 185th meeting, the Council will review the new information, reconsider its preliminary preferred alternative and will consider final action to provide NMFS with rebuilding recommendations and management measures.

4. Update to the Main Hawaiian Island Deep-Seven Bottomfish Annual Catch Limits (Initial Action)

PIFSC released the update to the main Hawaiian Islands deep-seven bottomfish stock assessment with catch and effort data updated to 2018 and fishery-independent survey data up to 2020. The stock remains healthy with the biomass reference point indicating it's not overfished and the fishery is sustainable, with the harvest reference point indicating the fishery is not experiencing overfishing. The assessment provided alternative catch levels at different risks of overfishing from 2021 to 2025 to inform the specification of new ACLs. The Science and Statistical Committee and the Council at their March 2021 meetings will consider the new information to determine if a change in the acceptable biological catch and ACL is warranted.

The current ACL (fishing years 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21) was specified at 40% risk of overfishing, accounting for the assessment information, uncertainty characterization, stock status, productivity and susceptibility of the species in the complex and the social,

economic, ecological and management uncertainties. The catch associated with this risk of overfishing is 492,000 pounds.

The catch in fishing year 2019-2020 was 161,825 pounds, which is 33% of the ACL. The catch in 2019-20 is lower than the catch in 2018-19, which is probably due to COVID-19. The stock assessment update simply added recent data and did not change the parameters covered in the Risk of Overfishing Analysis. The 40% risk of overfishing in the updated assessment resulted in an ACL of 496,000 pounds, or 4,000 pounds higher than the current ACL.

Given that the information used in the assessment update did not change the scores in the four dimensions of the scientific and management uncertainties, the stock status remained the same and the average catch is far below the ACL, at its 185th meeting, the Council may consider rolling over the current ACL of 492,000 pounds. Keeping the current ACL is more conservative, with the risk of overfishing being less than 1% lower than a 40% risk of overfishing.