

National Marine Fisheries Service**Pacific Islands Regional Office**

**REPORT TO THE 191th
WESTERN PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL MEETING**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) is responsible for assisting the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) in the development of fishery management plans and amendments, initiating Federal fishing regulations, issuing Federal fishing permits, and monitoring fisheries. Other major responsibilities include the conservation and recovery of protected species, conservation and restoration of marine habitats, including the Pacific marine national monuments, and coordination with international organizations to implement fishery agreements and treaties. The following information is provided to update the Council on NMFS activities since the 190th Council meeting.

SPOTLIGHT - Coral Reef Joint Fishery Management Plans

At the request of the U.S. Territories, NMFS has been coordinating and supporting the development of locally led Territorial sustainable coral reef fisheries management plans, also known as the Joint Coral Reef Fisheries Management Plans (JCR-FMPs). The initial focus is on American Samoa and Guam; NMFS anticipates engagement on similar efforts with Hawaii and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) in the coming years.

The JCR-FMPs include both fishery and non-fishery components. The fishery component focuses on coral reef fishery resources within Territorial waters, 0-3 nautical miles from shore. They include defined sustainable biological targets for island-scale management (such as maintaining 30 percent Spawning Potential Ratio) and monitoring targets to measure success and inform adaptive management. The Territories hosted Fish Path workshops and used NOAA's Fish Path tool to evaluate data limited information for Territorially-selected indicator fish species for management. The non-fishery component focuses on water quality, coastal protection, and watershed management, and would be further evaluated in a subsequent JCR-FMP workshop.

The JCR-FMPs are collaborative efforts between Territorial marine resource agencies, the US Coral Reef Task Force, NMFS, and local partners. In recognition of their responsibility and mandate for nearshore fisheries management, the Territories invited NMFS to support their efforts through guidance and technical assistance for both management and science.

The American Samoa effort launched in December 2019 and held a Fish Path workshop from May 23-27, 2022. The Guam effort launched in January 2021 and held a Fish Path workshop from June 1-2, and June 7-9, 2022. The JCR-FMP non-fishery component workshops in Guam and American Samoa will be held in the summer of 2022.

RULEMAKING

On March 28, 2022, NMFS published a final rule (87 FR 17195) to implement 2022–2025 annual catch limits (ACL) of 295,419 lb, annual catch targets (ACT) of 291,010 lb, and accountability measures (AM) for Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) uku (Gray jobfish). The ACLs and ACTs apply to the total combined commercial and noncommercial catch. As an in-season AM, if NMFS projects that the total catch will reach the ACT in any given fishing year, NMFS would close commercial and noncommercial uku fisheries in Federal waters for the remainder of the fishing year. As a post-season AM, if NMFS determines that the most recent three-year average total catch exceeded the ACL in a fishing year, NMFS would reduce the ACL and ACT for the following fishing year by the amount of the overage. The final rule supports the long-term sustainability of MHI uku, and became effective on April 27, 2022.

On April 28, 2022, NMFS published a final rule (87 FR 25153) to prohibit the use of wire leaders in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery, and require the removal of fishing gear from any oceanic whitetip shark caught in all of the region's domestic longline fisheries. The action is intended to increase post-hooking survival of oceanic whitetip sharks. The rule became effective on May 31, 2022.

On May 2, 2022, NMFS published a final rule for Amendment 5 to the Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the American Samoa Archipelago. Amendment 5 implements a rebuilding plan for overfished bottomfish that includes a 5,000 lb ACL starting in 2022. As an in-season AM, if NMFS projects that the fishery will reach the ACL in any year, then NMFS will close the fishery in Federal waters for the remainder of that year. As a higher performance standard, if the total annual catch exceeds the ACL during a year, NMFS will close the fishery in Federal waters until NMFS and the American Samoa government implement a coordinated management regime to ensure that the catch is maintained at levels that allow the stock to rebuild. This action is necessary to rebuild the overfished stock consistent with the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). The final rule became effective June 1, 2022.

NMFS issued temporary specifications to extend the effective date of Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) intersessional decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic on purse seine observer coverage and at-sea transshipment observers (87 FR 21812; April 13, 2022).

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

International Fisheries

NMFS hosted a public webinar to gather input on long-term management for Pacific bluefin tuna on April 1, 2022.

NMFS hosted a public webinar to gather input on further developing a harvest strategy for North Pacific albacore on April 5, 2022.

NMFS facilitated an informal meeting on May 20, 2022 to gather input on WCPFC South Pacific albacore management from interested stakeholders in preparation for a to-be scheduled meeting of the WCPFC's South Pacific Albacore Roadmap Working Group.

NMFS facilitated a webinar of the WCPFC Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to advise the U.S. Commissioners to the WCPFC, on June 8, 2022.

NMFS participated in a Special Session of the WCPFC to discuss the COVID-19 decisions relating to purse seine observer coverage and at-sea transshipment observers, on June 8, 2022.

NMFS led the United States' interagency delegation to the Pacific Community's (SPC) Annual Heads of Fisheries meeting June 13-16, 2022.

Sustainable Fisheries

On January 28, 2022, NMFS published a Notice of Availability of a draft environmental assessment (EA) for the Garapan Fishing Base shoreline revetment project in western Saipan (87 FR 4565), with a 30-day public comment period that closed February 28, 2022. NMFS proposes to provide Western Pacific Sustainable Fisheries Funds (WPSFF) to the Council to support the project. The Council would then provide funds to the CNMI Department of Land and Natural Resources to construct the revetment and stabilize 380 feet of shoreline. NMFS has completed the Magnuson-Stevens Act essential fish habitat (EFH), National Historic Preservation Act, and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) compliance reviews for the project. On January 14, 2022, NMFS provided the CNMI Division of Coastal Resources Management with a Federal Consistency Determination. NMFS is considering public comments and information from the compliance reviews, and expects to finalize the EA in June 2022.

NMFS published a draft programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) for a potential offshore aquaculture management program in the Pacific Islands on May 7, 2021. NMFS and Council staff have updated the PEIS in response to public comments and anticipate publishing the final PEIS in June 2022. The next step is for staff to prepare and the Council to consider potential fishery ecosystem plan amendments and implementing regulations to establish a program.

As of May 27, 2022, observer coverage is approximately 18 percent in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery, and 100 percent in the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery. Coverage in the American Samoa longline fishery is 0 percent due to flight cancellations. Coverage in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery for 2021 was approximately 18 percent and coverage in the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery was 100 percent. Coverage in the American Samoa longline fishery was 5 percent. More information about the Observer Program is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/pacific-islands-region-observer-program.

NMFS staff continue to participate in national grant programs that support the management and sustainability of U.S. fisheries.

- On February 14, 2022, NMFS announced that the Fisheries Information System (FIS), Electronic Technologies, Quality Management/Continuous Improvement, and Catch Share programs are collectively making available, subject to appropriations, up to \$5.5 million. This annual funding opportunity supports initiatives that improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of fisheries-dependent data collection and management. The deadline for final proposals is June 24, 2022. More information on FIS and the funding opportunity is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/commercial-fishing/fisheries-information-system-program#funding-innovative-projects.

- During the week of May 2, 2022, NMFS staff participated in the Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP) annual meeting. BREP supports development of technological solutions and changes in fishing practices designed to minimize fisheries bycatch; reduce interactions with seabirds, marine mammals, and ESA-listed species; and mitigate post-release mortality in Federal fisheries. A key focus of this meeting was to review and score full proposals for up to \$2.5 million in competitive BREP funding to support projects that meet this program's priorities. BREP will notify successful applicants this summer after scores and final prioritization are completed. More information is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/grant/bycatch-reduction-engineering-program-funding.

NMFS continues to provide required annual Protected Species Workshop (PSW) training to the longline fleet. From January 1 through May 23, 2022, NMFS completed 101 PSW certifications for Hawaii and American Samoa pelagic longline vessel owners and operators. NMFS offers an online PSW recertification training that may be taken two out of every three years. NMFS also offers in-person live webinar PSW certification courses every Friday morning for vessel owners and operators. NMFS recently completed an animated PSW handling and release video for further outreach and education to vessel owners, operators, and crew. The video is online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydcG1y7oNhg&t=6s.

NMFS continues to update information on fish catch limits at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/commercial-fishing/pacific-islands-annual-catch-limits.

NMFS continues to manage fisheries in consideration of status changes and incidental take events of protected species. Information about interactions between the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery and sea turtles is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/bycatch/sea-turtle-interactions-hawaii-shallow-set-longline-fishery.

NMFS continues to process all applications for fishing permits in the region electronically. Application and payment instructions for all permit types are at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-fishing-permits. Applicants may also contact NMFS for individual assistance at piro-permits@noaa.gov or (808) 725-5190. Current fishing permit status is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-permit-holders.

All Hawaii longline permit holders renewed online before the March 3, 2022 expiration date. Some permits were transferred, and a few new vessels entered the fishery. One experimental fishing permit was issued to Hawaii Longline Association for three vessels to test tori lines for seabird mitigation.

Permits as of May 27, 2022:

Permit	Number
Pelagic	
Hawaii longline (limited entry)	147 (of 164)
American Samoa longline (limited entry)	42 (of 60)
Western Pacific general longline	-
Receiving vessel	-
Pacific Remote Island Areas troll & handline	-
Pelagic squid jig	-
Experimental fishing permit	1
Hawaii	

Main Hawaiian Islands non-commercial bottomfish	1
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	2 (shrimp)
American Samoa	
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
Mariana Islands	
Guam large vessel bottomfish	-
Northern Mariana Islands bottomfish	6
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
Pacific Remote Island Areas	
Bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious corals	-
Crustaceans	-
Monuments	
Non-commercial and recreational charter	-

Protected Resources

On October 16, 2020, NMFS announced the initiation of a 5-year review for the Main Hawaiian Island Insular False Killer Whale Distinct Population Segment (MHI IFKW DPS) (85 FR 65791). NMFS accepted public comments and new information on the species' status through December 15, 2020. NMFS used relevant information received during the public comment period as well as any new information from the 2021 Recovery Status Review to determine if this DPS should remain listed as endangered. In April 2022, NMFS published a 5-year review that determined that the MHI IFKW DPS should remain listed as endangered. NMFS will continue to reexamine the status of the species once every 5 years to address new information available on this species.

NMFS observers have recorded 4 interactions with false killer whales in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery in 2022. One of those interactions, which occurred inside the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), resulted in a serious injury. The trigger value for the Southern Exclusion Zone (SEZ) closure is four observed mortality or serious injuries of false killer whales incidental to the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery within the EEZ (85 FR 81184). The False Killer Whale Take Reduction Team convened on February 3, 2022 to discuss the 2021 false killer whale interactions that occurred inside the EEZ. The Take Reduction Team is planning to hold a Team meeting in the fall of this year.

On January 25, 2021, NMFS received a petition to list the shortfin mako (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) under the ESA from Defenders of Wildlife. As part of the response to this petition, an Extinction Risk Assessment (ERA) team has been convened and is comprised of experts from across NMFS. The ERA team met several times in early 2022 and concluded its task of making recommendations to NMFS leadership (non-consensus) regarding the extinction risk of the shortfin mako. The Status Review Report is now undergoing preliminary internal review.

On Sept 8, 2016, NMFS issued a final rule identifying 14 DPSs of the humpback whale (81 FR 62260). Four DPSs are listed as endangered, 1 as threatened, and 9 do not warrant listing. NMFS has convened an internal working group to develop a 3-part Recovery Plan (Recovery Status Review, Recovery Plan, and Recovery Implementation Strategy) for the three listed DPSs that occur in U.S. waters (Western North Pacific DPS, Central America DPS, and Mexico DPS). NMFS anticipates publishing draft versions in late 2022.

Habitat Conservation

NMFS staff located in American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii continue to work with local and Federal resource partners to implement local projects that prioritize the management and conservation of coral reefs and other valuable habitats in the Pacific Islands Region, as part of the NMFS Coral Reef Program and an extension of the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP).

In the CNMI, NMFS continues to oversee the Saipan Coral Nursery Pilot and coral sexual propagation projects and coordinate a reef resilience study for Rota and Tinian scheduled for 2023. NMFS is working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the CNMI government to improve post-disaster preparedness. NMFS and staff from the NOAA vessel *Rainier* are coordinating an outreach event for Saipan to highlight the current Marianas research and mapping cruise.

At the U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA), PIRO continues to work under the USAKA Environmental Standards (UES) completing environmental assessments, reviews as well as consultations and coordinations for UES protected species.

NMFS recently brought on two new staff to bring the team to full capacity to focus on management planning for the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument in collaboration with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Public input from the Notice of Intent will inform the development of the draft management plan.

Following the appointment of Marianas Trench Monument Advisory Committee (MTMAC) members, an MTMAC meeting will be held to discuss the Mariana Trench Marine National Monument (MTMNM) Draft Management Plan and Environmental Assessment and solicit input from the MTMAC before the plan is finalized. The MTMAC is composed of representatives from NMFS, USFWS, US Coast Guard, the Department of Defense, and the CNMI government. It is anticipated that the MTMNM Management Plan will be finalized in early 2023.

NMFS staff have consulted on 23 essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations since February 1, 2022, including: a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) permit for a fiber optic cable landing in Guam; the Navy's Tinian Harbor pier repair project and the NOAA-supported giant clam research pilot project in Guam. For the Guam cable project, NMFS' recommendation to use horizontal directional drilling was supported by the USACE and will minimize direct impacts to corals. For the Navy Tinian Project, NMFS has been and will continue to provide technical assistance to relocate corals to minimize adverse effects and physical damage. The giant clam pilot project in Guam is intended to support research to support sustainable aquaculture, community engagement, and capacity building.

In February 2022, NMFS completed an update to the 2004 EFH Consultation Guidance document. The updated document (identification #: 03-201-11) can be found at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/laws-and-policies/habitat-conservation-and-restoration-policy-directives>.