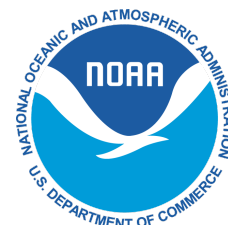


National Marine Fisheries Service**Pacific Islands Regional Office**

**REPORT TO THE 194th
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 193rd Council meeting.

SPOTLIGHT

On January 24, 2023, NMFS reissued the experimental fishing permit (EFP) to the Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) under 50 CFR 665.17. The EFP will be used to evaluate the risk of seabird interactions in the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery when setting one hour before and one hour after local sunset and using tori lines instead of blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge. The EFP was reissued to reflect a change in participating vessels. NMFS also reviewed and approved the tori line specifications that HLA provided to NMFS on January 10, 2023. Fishing under this EFP will be conducted using tori lines that meet these approved specifications. This EFP is valid until September 24, 2023, or for a maximum of 80 fishing sets, whichever occurs first, unless revoked, suspended, or modified.

RULEMAKING

NMFS will soon publish a final rule to implement annual catch limits (ACL) and post-season accountability measures (AM) for the main Hawaiian Islands deepwater shrimp and precious corals for each fishing year in the time period between 2022 and 2025. The proposed ACLs are unchanged from past years. Harvests of these species have been sporadic over the last 15 years and have never exceeded their ACLs since first implemented in 2012. There are currently two active Federal permits for deepwater shrimp and none for precious coral. The current gold coral harvest moratorium – implemented in 2008 due to uncertainty in estimates of age and growth parameters – will expire on June 30, 2023 (83 FR 27716, June 14, 2018). The moratorium serves as the functional equivalent of a gold coral ACL of zero. Should the Council wish to extend or end the moratorium after June 30, 2023, NMFS and the Council would need to conduct a separate analysis of that action together with appropriate rulemaking.

NMFS will soon publish a proposed 2023 specification limit of 2,000 metric tons (t) of longline-caught bigeye tuna for each U.S. Pacific territory (American Samoa, Guam, and the

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)). NMFS would authorize each territory to transfer up to 1,500 t of its limit, not to exceed an overall allocation limit of 3,000 t, to U.S. longline fishing vessels through valid specified fishing agreements. As an AM, NMFS would monitor, attribute, and restrict (if necessary) catches of longline-caught bigeye tuna, including catches made under a specified fishing agreement. The proposed action would support the long-term sustainability of fishery resources of the U.S. Pacific Islands. The Council recommended the proposed specifications, consistent with the process set forth in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan for Pelagic Fisheries of the Western Pacific and in Federal regulations at 50 CFR 665.819.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Habitat Conservation

NMFS staff continue to provide support, technical assistance, and coordination to local partners in American Samoa, Guam, and Hawaii with the development of Jurisdictional Coral Reef Fisheries Management Plans (JCR-FMPs). This effort involves substantial coordination with the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) to enable completion of the fisheries component of the JCR-FMPs. In American Samoa, NMFS continues to support the development of JCR-FMP by providing a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) and Cluster Analysis to inform potential sustainable fisheries management options. In Guam, participants adopted a guidance document that outlines steps for completing the Guam JCR-FMP. The document includes guidance for the identification of priority species and a management strategy evaluation.

In CNMI, NMFS continues to oversee the Saipan Coral Nursery Pilot and coral sexual propagation projects and coordinate a reef resilience study for Tinian. NMFS is also working with local and federal partners to improve post-disaster preparedness.

In Hawaii, NMFS continues to support the state's Holomua Initiative by providing technical support for the ongoing sustainable coral reef fisheries management planning efforts in Maui.

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

PIRO, PIFSC, and the Council have completed an internal review of a draft report from the October 4, 2022 WPFMC-PIFSC-PIRO Ecosystems-based Fisheries Management (EBFM) Workshop. The report is currently going through the editorial process prior to submission as a technical memorandum. The final report will be shared when it is complete.

Selected Council, PIFSC, and PIRO staff will be taking part in a 2.5 day Scenario Planning training from March 1-3, 2023. The goal of the training will be to build capacity for scenario planning as a methodology to evaluate management strategies that have been implemented or are proposed for implementation to respond to novel ecosystem transformations brought about by climate change in an acceptably responsive timeframe. Through the training, participants will



learn and practice each step of the scenario process using several “training case studies” that will be based on relevant strategic challenges facing the Pacific Islands Region. At the conclusion of the training, one or two case studies will be selected to go through a formal scenario planning process which will lead to options for addressing that strategic challenge.

Since November 2022, NMFS has conducted 12 essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations, including four under a programmatic consultation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). In late August 2022, NMFS, as a cooperating agency, completed review of the Navy’s proposed submarine drydock upgrade project in Pearl Harbor, which is part of their Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Program. Since then, NMFS has continued to coordinate with the Navy on the project (e.g., providing input on specific activities and planning for invasive species management). NMFS also completed consultation on the USACE permit for the landing of two submarine cables in East Hagatna Bay, Guam and excavation in Tanapag Harbor around a World War II-era plane. In addition, NMFS has completed consultations on research activities, fish pond restoration, wastewater treatment improvements, crown-of-thorns starfish removal, and coastal road pavement projects. NMFS led a one-day EFH training for the US Coast Guard in December 2022. Lastly, NMFS continues to update EFH outreach documents for American Samoa and the Marianas.

International Fisheries

NMFS staff participated in the 19th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC19) in Vietnam in December 2023. At WCPFC19, the Commission adopted a new management procedure for skipjack tuna, a new conservation and management measure for north Pacific swordfish, improved electronic reporting requirements, and adopted the U.S. proposal for a standing agenda item on climate change for all subsidiary bodies and at the annual meeting. Another U.S. proposal was also adopted that prohibits longline vessels operating within 20 degrees of the equator in the WCPFC from using wire traces as branch lines among other precautions. For 2023, WCPFC19 restarted the observer working group, committed the Commission to adopt a south Pacific albacore management procedure, and provided a road map for negotiating a new tropical tuna measure during the intersessional period, aiming for adoption of a new tropical tuna measure by the Commission at WCPFC20 (Cook Islands, December 2024).

NMFS staff also participated in the 11th Annual Meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO11) and the subsidiary body meetings, held in Manta, Ecuador from February 7-17, 2023. SPRFMO adopted 13 proposals including the U.S. proposals on high seas boarding and inspection and climate change. The Commission also passed a measure on jumbo flying squid which included several key components of the U.S. proposal. Finally, Alexa Cole, Director of NOAA Office of International Affairs, Trade, and Commerce (IATC) was elected as the new Vice-chair of the Commission.



Protected Resources

NMFS observers recorded seven interactions with false killer whales in the deep-set longline fishery in 2022. Two of those interactions occurred inside the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and resulted in serious injury. The trigger value for the Southern Exclusion Zone closure is four observed false killer whale mortalities or serious injuries in the deep-set longline fishery that occur in the EEZ around Hawaii (85 FR 81184). The False Killer Whale Take Reduction Team will convene for two webinars on February 28 and March 10, 2023 to review information relative to false killer whale bycatch and mitigation ahead of the multi-day meeting on March 28-31, 2023. The focus of the multi-day meeting is to develop recommendations to reduce mortality and serious injury of false killer whales.

NMFS convened an internal working group to develop a three-part Recovery Plan (Recovery Status Review, Recovery Plan, and Recovery Implementation Strategy) for the three Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed humpback whale Distinct Population Segments (DPS) that occur in U.S. waters (Western North Pacific DPS, Central America DPS, and Mexico DPS). NMFS anticipates publishing draft versions in 2023. 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.

On January 25, 2023, NMFS published a notice in the Federal Register announcing the availability of a Draft Recovery Plan for the oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) (88 FR 4817) for the purposes of achieving recovery and ultimately leading to the removal of the species from the federal list of threatened and endangered species. The Draft Recovery Plan focuses on the statutory components of a recovery plan as required under the ESA: (1) a description of site-specific management actions necessary for the conservation and survival of the species (recovery actions); (2) objective, measurable criteria that, when met, will allow the species to be removed from the endangered and threatened species list (recovery criteria); and (3) estimates of the time and funding required to achieve the plan's goals. NMFS is accepting public comments on the draft plan through March 27, 2023.

On November 27, 2020, NMFS proposed critical habitat for several listed corals in American Samoa, Guam, CNMI, and the U.S. Pacific Remote Island Area (PRIA). During the six month public comment period, the Council, the territorial governments, and others provided new information on the historical records of listed corals and their application to critical habitat. Subsequently, NMFS worked with the territorial governments, the USFWS Refuges Program, and others to gather and review all records of listed corals in American Samoa, Guam, CNMI, and the PRIA, and developed a new methodology for application of the records to the final coral critical habitat rule. NMFS is revising the proposed rule, and will either publish a final rule or withdraw the 2020 proposed rule, and publish a new proposed rule followed by a public comment period.

In coordination with USFWS, NMFS is in the process of identifying areas for green sea turtle critical habitat designation, including locations in Hawaii, American Samoa, PRIA, Guam, and CNMI. Critical habitat is being evaluated for the Central North Pacific DPS listed under the ESA



as threatened, the Central West Pacific DPS listed as endangered, and the Central South Pacific DPS listed as endangered. In May 2022, portions of the Draft Biological Report were distributed to state and territorial partners for review. A final draft of the Biological Report and the Draft Economic Report will be available for review and public comment when a proposed rule to designate critical habitat for green sea turtles is published in the Federal Register, which is expected in 2023.

NMFS is coordinating with the state of Hawaii and territorial government partners in American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam to provide a comprehensive overview regarding critical habitat designations for protected species under the ESA. The purpose of these presentations is to provide information on what critical habitat is/is not and to encourage dialogue regarding common concerns and questions related to the designation process and potential implications of a designation. NMFS also plans to give this presentation at the 194th Western Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting in March 2023.

Sustainable Fisheries

PIRO and PIFSC jointly supported an electronic monitoring (EM) detailee from October through December 2022. PIFSC has been testing EM since 2017 on 20 volunteer longline vessels, showing promising results. PIFSC and PIRO are interested in transitioning from a volunteer EM research program to EM implementation that would supplement observer coverage. The detailee focused on developing a roadmap for the potential future implementation of EM in the Hawaii pelagic longline fisheries. They communicated with a variety of NMFS staff and regional stakeholders and took a lead role in facilitating meetings of the Electronic Technologies Steering Committee (ETSC), which was reconvened to support the further development of an EM program. The ETSC includes representatives from the fishing industry, the Council, PIRO, and PIFSC and is currently working to develop options and scenarios for the implementation of EM in U.S. longline fisheries in the Western Pacific. The ETSC met on October 24, 2022, November 15, 2022, December 16, 2022, and most recently on February 9, 2023. The roadmap to potential future implementation of EM in the Hawaii and American Samoa longline fisheries will be available in 2023.

The Observer Program installed the Onboard Record Collection Application (ORCA) on four rugged tablet demonstration units to test the software and hardware at-sea. The tablets being tested are the DELL Latitude Rugged Extreme 7220, the Getac F110, the Mobile Demand T1190, and the Zebra Xslate L10ax. All four tablets were sent out to sea in late 2022 on both deep-set and shallow-set vessels. The observers provided valuable feedback on specific criteria such as battery life, tablet ruggedness, screen brightness, and ease of navigating the tablet and the ORCA software.

In March 2023, the Observer Program will host an in person fisheries observer training class with an estimated class size of 8-10 recruits. This will be the first return to this training format since 2019.



As of February 6, 2023, observer coverage is 20.1 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. Coverage in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery for 2022 was 20.2 percent and coverage in the Hawaii shallow-set longline fishery was 100 percent. Coverage in the American Samoa longline fishery was 8.7 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 December 15, 2023, the Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP) 2023 announced its annual federal funding opportunity. BREP provides critical funds for investigating problems and developing solutions designed to minimize bycatch of fish and protected species and reduce bycatch mortality. Pre-proposals were due on January 20, 2023. Full proposals are due April 3, 2023. More information on BREP and the annual funding opportunity can be found at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/bycatch/bycatch-reduction-engineering-program.
- On February 13, 2023, the Fisheries Information System (FIS), Electronic Technologies, and Catch Share programs announced their annual federal funding opportunity. This annual funding opportunity supports initiatives that improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of fisheries-dependent data collection and management. Pre-proposals are due on April 7, 2023. More information on FIS and the annual funding opportunity is at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/commercial-fishing/fisheries-information-system-program#funding-innovative-projects.

NMFS continues to provide required annual Protected Species Workshop (PSW) training to the longline fleet. From January 1 through December 31, 2022, NMFS completed 283 PSW certifications for Hawaii and American Samoa vessel owners and operators. NMFS offers an online PSW recertification training that may be taken two out of every three years, and a live PSW certification course every Friday morning. The live course is offered in-person only on the first Friday of each month and as a hybrid course, which can be attended virtually or in-person, on every following Friday. NMFS recently reopened the Honolulu Service Center at Pier 38, and has since held 21 live workshops (3 in-person and 18 hybrid). For more information, fishermen may contact NMFS at pirosw@noaa.gov or (808) 725-5178, or visit the PIRO PSW webpage at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-protected-species-workshops. Lastly, for additional outreach to fishermen, an animated PSW handling and release 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 observed interactions in Pacific Island longline fisheries with protected marine species can be found at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/data/pacific-islands-longline-quarterly-and-annual-reports>.

Hawaii longline permits must be renewed by March 3, 2023 to remain active in 2023. As of February 3, 2023, about 65% of Hawaii longline permits have been renewed. All Pacific Islands region fishing permit applications and payments are processed electronically. Instructions are at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-fishing-permits. 2023 MMAP certificates are also available on the permit site. Applicants may 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.

Permits as of February 2023:

Permit	Number
Pelagic	
Hawaii longline (limited entry)	150 (of 164)
American Samoa longline (limited entry)	34 (of 60)
Western Pacific general longline	-
Receiving vessel	2
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	9
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
Pacific Remote Island Areas	
Pelagic Troll & Handline	-
Bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious Coral	-
Crustaceans	-
Marine National Monument	
Recreational Fishing	-
Recreational Charter	-

