



Giant manta ray. Photo: Pexel.com/Matt Waters.

NMFS Determines Hawai'i and American Samoa Tuna Longline Fisheries Not Likely to Jeopardize ESA-Listed Oceanic Whitetip Sharks and Giant Manta Rays



The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) completed the long-awaited biological opinions (BiOps) analyzing the impacts of the region's two tuna-targeting U.S. longline fisheries on oceanic whitetip (OWT) sharks and giant manta rays. The two species were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2018. NMFS concluded that the two fisheries, the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery targeting bigeye tuna and the American Samoa longline fishery targeting albacore tuna, are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of OWT sharks and giant manta rays. These species are incidentally captured in the U.S. longline fisheries and released following safe handling guidelines. Most OWT sharks and giant manta rays are released alive and have a high probability of survival after the encounter.

For all other ESA-listed species, NMFS previously prepared BiOps for the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery in 2014 and American Samoa longline fishery in 2015. NMFS initiated the process for updating the existing BiOp for the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery in 2018 and for the American Samoa longline fishery in 2019, and anticipates completing the all-species BiOps in early 2023. The Council has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the delays in completing these BiOps, which ESA requires to be completed within 135 days.

The "no-jeopardy" conclusion of the "Supplemental BiOps" means that the level of incidental interactions (hooking

or entanglement) of OWT sharks and giant manta rays in the two fisheries are not likely to appreciably reduce the likelihood of their survival or recovery. The impacts are not likely to cause material changes to the species' numbers, reproduction or distribution. This conclusion was based on the finding that the impacts of the two fisheries on the OWT shark population in the Pacific Ocean (estimated at ~1.3 million individuals) represents ~0.03% of the population in each of the fisheries, and that the best available information indicates the current population trajectory of this species is on an upward trend. Less is known about population estimates of giant manta rays. NMFS estimated that the subpopulations impacted by the Hawai'i deep-set and American Samoa longline fisheries have at least 1,000 individuals, and found that the level of impact from the two fisheries is small enough to allow the populations to increase over the next 40 years.

The Supplemental BiOps include reasonable and prudent measures (RPMs) that require that OWT sharks and giant manta rays incidentally caught alive in the fisheries be released in a manner that increases post-release survivorship by minimizing the amount of trailing gear left on the animal. The RPMs also require that NMFS continue to monitor and report interactions through the existing observer program, but did not trigger any new management measures. 🐟