

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



**REPORT TO THE 197th
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 197th Council meeting.

SPOTLIGHT

On October 17, 2023, NMFS published a proposed rule to modify seabird interaction mitigation measures in the Hawai'i pelagic deep-set (tuna) longline fishery ([88 FR 71523](#)). For vessels stern-setting above 23° N latitude, we propose to replace the blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge requirements with a new tori line (bird-scaring streamers) requirements. The proposed action is intended to reduce albatross interactions while also streamlining fishing operations and management of this fishery. Shallow-set and side-setting vessel requirements would not be impacted by this proposed rule.

RULEMAKING

On October 3, 2023, NMFS announced a valid specified fishing agreement between the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and the Hawai'i Longline Association ([88 FR 67984](#)). The agreement allocates up to 1,500 metric tons of CNMI's 2023 bigeye tuna limit to U.S. longline fishing vessels identified in the agreement. The start date for attributing 2023 bigeye tuna catch to the CNMI under the agreement was October 8, 2023.

On October 6, 2023, NMFS established the annual harvest guideline for the commercial lobster fishery in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands for calendar year 2023 at zero lobsters ([88 FR 69554](#)).

On October 6, 2023, NMFS announced the availability of 25 American Sāmoa pelagic longline limited entry permits for 2023 ([88 FR 69621](#)). Seventeen permits are available for small vessels (vessels up to 50 feet in overall length), and 8 permits are available for large vessels (vessels 50 feet or longer in overall length). This permit allows vessels to (1) use longline gear to fish for

pelagic species within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around American Sāmoa; and (2) land or transship longline catch in American Sāmoa—or within the EEZ around American Sāmoa. Complete permit applications, including payment, must be received by February 5, 2024.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Directorate

In October, NMFS highlighted Seafood Month on our [website](#) and our social media pages ([Facebook](#) / [X](#)). Examples of related products for Seafood Month include:

- [From Ocean to Plate: How the Longline Fishery Feeds Hawai'i](#) (video)
- [Restorative Aquaculture for Hawaiian Kūmū](#)
- [Working Towards Zero-Waste Seafood](#) - Featured grantee Conservation International Hawai'i and Chef Hui hosted three dinners at local restaurants during Seafood Month to promote zero-waste seafood in Hawai'i. The effort was part of a NMFS Saltonstall-Kennedy grant.
- [Learn How to Fish From the Pros in Hawai'i](#)
- [Growing Seaweed: Aquaculture in Harmony with the Environment](#)

December 28, 2023, marks the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act. To celebrate, PIRO is hosting a Pacific Islands ESA@50 Ocean Art Contest for K-12 students in the region. For more information, visit:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/event/pacific-islands-esa50-ocean-art-contest>.

Habitat Conservation

Since the 196th Council Meeting, NMFS has completed 12 individual essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations, as well as 9 EFH consultations approved using the programmatic consultation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The individual consultations addressed vessel mooring projects in Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i; U.S. Coast Guard response to remove fuel from grounded vessel M/V VOYAGER in Apra Harbor; Wake Atoll reverse osmosis water purification systems replacement; Federal Highway Administration guardrail and shoulder improvements at various locations across O'ahu; Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency funded equipment testing in support of "Reefense"; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Rose Atoll sea turtle 2023 research; and physical and chemical analysis of coral ingested microplastics across the Pacific.

The Pacific Islands Region (PIR) Climate Workshop, hosted jointly by PIRO and Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC), has been postponed until the spring of 2024. Staff are looking for dates that will allow for maximum participation. NMFS will provide more information when exact dates have been selected.

NOAA is awarding \$45 million for projects that will advance the coastal habitat restoration and climate resilience priorities of tribes and underserved communities. This funding is available

through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act. Proposals must be received through Grants.gov by 11:59 p.m. EST on **December 19, 2023**. More information is available on the [Fisheries web page](#). (Deadline in Pacific Islands regional time zones: 2:59 p.m. ChST on 12/20/23; 6:59 p.m. HST on 12/19/23; 5:59 p.m. SST on 12/19/23)

International Fisheries

NMFS participated in the 19th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Scientific Committee (SC19) from August 16-24, 2023, in Koror, Palau. SC19 provided recommendations for each of its four themes, and in particular, SC19 provided stock status and conservation advice for western and central Pacific Ocean bigeye tuna and western and central Pacific Ocean yellowfin tuna.

NMFS participated in the 11th Scientific Committee meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SC11) from September 11-16, 2023, in Panama City, Panama. SC11 provided recommendations for a variety of themes including habitat monitoring, jumbo flying squid, deepwater species, jack mackerel, and climate change. The Commission will consider the SC recommendations at the upcoming annual meeting in January, 2024.

NMFS participated in the 19th Regular Session of the WCPFC Technical and Compliance Committee meeting from September 20-26, 2023, in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, where a new means of reviewing compliance among participating nations was used for the first time. Immediately following that meeting, NMFS participated in the 4th WCPFC workshop to develop a revised tropical tuna measure, in preparation for finalizing revisions to that measure at the 20th plenary of the WCPFC in December 2023.

NMFS hosted the annual meeting of the Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to advise the U.S. Commissioners to the WCPFC on October 2 and 3, 2023, at Ala Moana Hotel and via WebEx. The meeting was attended by members of the PAC, Territory officials, Pacific and Western and Central Pacific Fishery Management Council officials, Department of State, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Commissioners to WCPFC, and members of the public. The PAC members agreed on 72 recommendations in 13 categories for the U.S. Commissioners and U.S. government officials to consider as the U.S. delegation prepares for the upcoming WCPFC meeting in December.

Protected Resources

To date in 2023, NMFS fishery observers have recorded 4 interactions with false killer whales in the deep-set longline fishery. One 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 Hawai'i ([85 FR 81184](#)).

NMFS is moving forward with the next steps on critical habitat for Western Pacific coral species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). On November 27, 2020, NMFS proposed critical habitat for several listed corals in American Sāmoa, 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 substantial new information on the historical records of listed corals and their application to critical habitat. Subsequently, NMFS worked with the territorial governments, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Refuges Program, and others to gather and review all records of listed corals in American Sāmoa, 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.

On July 19, 2023, in coordination with USFWS, NMFS published a proposed rule to designate marine critical habitat for green sea turtles, including locations in Hawai'i, American Sāmoa, PRIA, Guam, and CNMI. Critical habitat has been proposed for the Central North Pacific distinct population segment (DPS), which is 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. NMFS held in-person and virtual public hearings throughout the region during the public comment period to receive comments on the proposed designations. On August 10, 2023, an information meeting and virtual hearing was held for the Central North Pacific DPS. On August 16, 2023, NMFS and USFWS staff hosted an in-person informational meeting and public hearing in American Sāmoa for the Central South Pacific DPS. PIRO and USFWS also held informational meetings and public hearings in Guam on August 21, 2023 and Saipan on August 23, 2023. The public comment period for the proposed rule closed on October 17, 2023.

In 2024, NMFS anticipates publishing a 12-month finding on a 2016 petition to list 10 species of giant clams as threatened or endangered under the ESA throughout their respective ranges. This follows a 90-day finding published in 2017 when NMFS announced that the petition presented substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted for 7 of the 10 species listed in the petition ([82 FR 28946](#)).

Sustainable Fisheries

In August 2023, NMFS awarded a new 5-year Pacific Islands Region longline observer service provider contract to FLOAT, a Small Business Administration approved Mentor-Protégé Joint Venture between Fisheries Immersed Sciences Hawai'i (FISH) and Lynker Ocean Alliance Team Partners. In May 2023, the PIRO Longline Observer Program (PIROP) began reducing the target coverage rate in the deep-set fishery from 20 to 17 percent due to a combination of issues including increased labor costs, increased number of fishing trips, and decreased funding available for the program. In October 2023, the PIROP continued to reduce at-sea observer coverage in the deep-set longline fishery from 17 to 15 percent. PIRO continues to explore options to reduce observing costs, and is well underway with an electronic reporting program to

collect observer data via e-tablets, and is working with PIFSC on increasing use of onboard cameras for electronic monitoring and data collection.

On October 27, 2023, PIRO Sustainable Fisheries Division requested PIRO Protected Species Division re-initiate ESA Section 7 consultation to evaluate the effects of the Hawai'i shallow-set longline fishery on the North Pacific loggerhead sea turtle distinct population segment. Reinitiation of consultation is required because in April 2023, the fishery exceeded the incidental take statement of 36 loggerhead sea turtles as defined in the 2019 no-jeopardy biological opinion for the fishery. To support this consultation, PIRO, with input from PIFSC, the Council, and the Hawai'i Longline Association prepared a biological evaluation that describes the proposed action and potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the fishery on the population.

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

- Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP):
 - On September 8, 2023, NMFS announced its FY23 BREP Awards. The Agency awarded \$2.5 million to partners around the country to support 14 innovative bycatch reduction research projects.
 - On September 28, 2023, NMFS announced its [FY24 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 are due on December 15, 2023. Full proposals are due March 20, 2023.
 - More information on BREP, previously funded projects, and the annual funding opportunity can be found on the BREP [website](#).

- Fisheries Information System (FIS) annual federal funding opportunity. Selected projects are funded in partnership with the NMFS National Observer Program's Electronic Technologies program and the National Catch Share Program. Funding priorities are set by the FIS Program Management Team, whose members represent a broad cross-section of state, regional, and federal partners from regional offices, science centers, and Fisheries Information Networks from all over the country. This year five proposals will be funded in the Pacific Islands, including:
 - research to study the use of artificial intelligence for electronic monitoring;
 - continuing work to improve creel survey reporting in American Sāmoa, Guam, and CNMI;
 - continue development of eReporting for observers,
 - modernizing data systems for logbooks, and
 - updating State of Hawai'i's online license and reporting tools

More information on FIS and the annual funding opportunity can be found on the FIS [website](#).

NMFS continues to provide required annual Protected Species Workshop (PSW) training to the longline fleet. 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 reopened the Honolulu Service Center at Pier 38 in late November 2022, and to date in 2023 (Jan. 1 through Sep 1, 2023), has held 33 live workshops (9 in-person and 24 hybrid) and had 52 individuals register for the online PSW recertification training. For more information, fishermen may contact NMFS at piropsw@noaa.gov or (808) 725-5178, or visit the PIRO PSW [webpage](#). Lastly, for additional outreach to fishermen, an animated PSW handling and release [video](#) is available online.

NMFS continues to update information on fish catch limits, available on the PIRO [website](#).

All Pacific Islands region fishing permit applications and payments are processed electronically. Applications are submitted through the National Permit System (NPS) or through Kiteworks secure file transfer. Fee payments are processed in NPS or through the Department of Treasury’s [pay.gov](#) secure online payment system. PIRO’s permit website includes [instructions](#) for fishing permit applications and for 2024 Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) certificates. Applicants may contact NMFS for individual assistance at piro-permits@noaa.gov or (808) 725-5190. Applicants may also visit the [website](#) for current fishing permit status. Current Hawaii longline and Western Pacific receiving vessel permits expire on March 3, 2024. On November 2, 2023, PIRO emailed a reminder to Hawaii longline permit holders to renew their permits online. As of November 14, 2023, 14 permits have been renewed and more are in process.

Permits as of November 2023:

Permit	Number
Pelagic	
Hawai'i longline (limited entry)	150 active, 14 inactive/no-vessel (164 of 164)
American Sāmoa longline (limited entry)	34 active, 26 inactive/no-vessel (60 of 60)
Western Pacific general longline	-
Receiving vessel	2
Pelagic squid jig	-
Experimental fishing permit	1
Hawai'i	
Main Hawaiian Islands non-commercial bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	3 (shrimp)
American Sāmoa	

Permit	Number
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
Mariana Islands	
Guam large vessel bottomfish	-
Northern Mariana Islands bottomfish	1
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	-