

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

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**REPORT TO THE 196th  
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 195th Council meeting.

**SPOTLIGHT**

In June 2023, NMFS published the *Pacific Islands Regional Action Plan (PIRAP) To Implement the NOAA Fisheries Climate Science Strategy Through 2024*. The PIRAP was developed to address the effects of climate change that are already evident across the Pacific Islands region. This updated PIRAP identifies climate-related actions to address the seven NOAA Fisheries Climate Science Strategy (NCSS) objectives and regional needs through 2024, drawing on the successes and lessons learned from carrying out the initial PIRAP from 2017 through 2021. More information can be found at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/pacific-islands-regional-action-plan-implement-noaa-fisheries-climate-science>

As directed by the PIRAP, NMFS will host the 6th Annual Collaborative Climate Workshop (Workshop) on November 14-16, 2023. The workshop will provide an engaging opportunity for staff from PIFSC, PIRO, and the Council to think creatively about ways to address climate change in the Pacific Islands Region. The Workshop's participatory sessions are designed to engage the full breadth of NMFS concerns in the Western Pacific, and each session endeavors to increase participant understanding of how management is informed by and guides climate data collection and research questions. Outputs of the Workshop include more structured pathways for coordination on climate change issues, increased collective understanding of the key climate projects in the Pacific Islands Region, and greater clarity on the relationship between natural resource management and climate science and data.

**RULEMAKING**

On June 15, 2023, NMFS published in the Federal Register (FR) the final 2023 Territorial bigeye specification limit of longline-caught bigeye tuna for each U.S. Pacific territory (American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI; 88 FR 18509)).

NMFS authorizes 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 accountability measure (AM), NMFS will monitor, attribute, and restrict (if necessary) catches of longline-caught bigeye tuna, including catches made under a specified fishing agreement. This action supports the long-term sustainability of fishery resources of the U.S. Pacific Islands.

On June 20, 2023, NMFS announced in the Federal Register the approval of a Marine Conservation Plan (MCP) for the Pacific Insular Area for CNMI. The MCP outlines conservation and management objectives, identifies activities intended to fulfill those objectives, and ranks priorities for specific planned activities in the CNMI, consistent with Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) section 204(e)(7)(C). The MCP also includes evaluative criteria for determining when applicable conservation and management objectives have been met. The MCP is effective from August 4, 2023, through August 3, 2026.

## **PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

### **Directorate/Operations**

On August 21-25, 2023, NMFS offered "How to Apply for Federal Grants" workshops at the Guam Museum in Guam and the National Park Service American Memorial Park in CNMI. NMFS staff presented on regional funding opportunities, the Saltonstall-Kennedy (S-K) Grants Program, and funds available through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL).

### **Habitat Conservation**

NMFS continues to provide support, technical assistance, and coordination to local partners in American Samoa, Guam, and Hawai'i with the development of Jurisdictional Coral Reef Fisheries Management Plans (JCR-FMPs). This effort involves substantial coordination with PIFSC to enable completion of the fisheries component of the JCR-FMPs. In American Samoa and Guam, current JCR-FMP efforts include NMFS staff coordinating with local agencies evaluate harvest strategies to help achieve the desired spawning potential ratio of target priority fish species for their respective jurisdictions.

In Guam, NMFS is coordinating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other relevant agencies to conduct post-typhoon Mawar natural resource and coral reef impact assessments for emergency response and restoration.

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 Hawai'i, NMFS continues to support Hawai'i's Holomua Initiative by providing technical support for the ongoing sustainable coral reef fisheries management planning efforts in Maui and helping to plan for efforts in additional islands in the future.

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.

Since the 195th Council Meeting, NMFS has completed 11 individual essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations, as well as 13 EFH consultations approved using the programmatic consultation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The individual consultations addressed vessel mooring projects in Kona, Hawai'i; anchoring for USCG vessels in Kāne'ohe Bay, Lahaina, and Hilo; shoreline hardening projects near Hagåtña Marina, Guam and the Saipan Fishing Base South Shoreline; coral restoration in Maunalua Bay and West O'ahu; issuance of Rights of Way Permit through the Marianas Trench National Wildlife Refuge; live fire training exercises for the USCG in Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025; and for NPDES permit for Mike and November Wharves Repair in Guam. Also, NMFS was a cooperating agency and completed an EFH consultation with the Federal Highway Administration on the Honoapi'ilani Highway in West Maui.

### **International Fisheries**

On July 3-5, 2023, in Fukuoka, Japan, NMFS participated in the Eighth Joint Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission's (WCPFC) Northern Committee (NC) Working Group Meeting on Pacific Bluefin Tuna (PBF) Management (JWG8). JWG8 agreed to recommend projection scenarios for the 2024 PBF assessment, candidate objectives, performance indicators, reference points and harvest control rules for the PBF management strategy evaluation, and interim decision rules for the PBF harvest strategy.

Subsequently, on July 6-7, 2023, NMFS participated in the 19th Regular Session of the NC in Fukuoka, Japan. NC agreed to recommendations on PBF from JWG8. The NC also agreed to recommend a revised North Pacific albacore harvest strategy to include harvest control rules and a revised North Pacific swordfish CMM.

On July 12-17, 2023, NMFS participated in ISC 23 in Fukuoka, Japan. ISC provided conservation advice on the assessments conducted in 2023 including North Pacific albacore, North Pacific swordfish and WCNPO striped marlin, and established a peer review process.

On August 7-11, 2023, NMFS participated virtually in the IATTC annual meeting held in Victoria, Canada. The IATTC successfully adopted proposals on climate change, silky sharks, Pacific bluefin tuna, fish aggregating devices (FADs), a consolidated sharks proposal requiring fins to be naturally attached with certain exemptions, and North Pacific albacore.

### **Protected Resources**

In July and August 2023, leadership from NMFS Pacific Islands Protected Resources Division traveled to Guam, Saipan, Tininian, and Rota to meet with partners and community members to

listen to concerns on issues related to protected species and explore opportunities for increased collaboration and communication.

To date in 2023, NMFS fishery observers have recorded two 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 or endangered 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 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. The proposed rule, final Draft Biological Report, and Draft Economic Report are available for review and public comment until October 27, 2023. NMFS is holding 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 Samoa 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.

NMFS continues to coordinate with the state of Hawai'i and territorial government partners in American Sāmoa, CNMI, and Guam to provide a comprehensive overview of 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 provided this presentation at the Guam Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC), Saipan REAC, and Council meetings in March 2023. NMFS is still offering to provide this informational presentation to anyone interested.

NMFS has awarded over \$1 million in funding to support sea turtle and monk seal recovery efforts. NMFS awarded \$430,000 to fund five internationally based projects and an additional \$581,000 to continue support of nine Hawai'i-based projects for sea turtles and Hawaiian monk seals. The five internationally based projects will support the ongoing conservation needs of leatherback, loggerhead, and olive ridley sea turtles in Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Japan, and the Philippines. The leatherback turtle projects, in particular, maintain momentum of existing programs supported since 2017 and also implement critical elements of NOAA's Species in the Spotlight Leatherback Turtle Action Plan.

### **Sustainable Fisheries**

On August 29-30, 2023, NMFS attended the American Samoa Bottomfish Management Unit Species (BMUS) P\* and Social, Economic, Ecological, and Management (SEEM) working group meetings at the Tradewinds Hotel in American Samoa. The P\* evaluation quantifies the scientific uncertainties of the stock assessment, while the SEEM evaluation considers the social, economic, ecology, and management aspects of the fishery. These working groups provide the Council with information for specifying the annual catch limits (ACLs) for the American Samoa bottomfish fishery.

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

- During August 2023, NMFS staff participated in merit review of final proposals to the Fisheries Information System (FIS) annual federal funding opportunity. Selected projects are funded in partnership with the 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 shared governance structure ensures FIS is meeting regional fisheries-dependent data needs while sharing best practices and lessons learned across geographic boundaries and professional disciplines. Decisions on successful proposals should be announced in September. 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](https://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. 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](mailto:piropsw@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-](https://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=ydcG1y7oNhq&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydcG1y7oNhq&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](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/commercial-fishing/pacific-islands-annual-catch-limits).

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. Instructions are at [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-fishing-permits](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-fishing-permits). 2023 Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) certificates are also available on the permit site. Applicants may contact NMFS for individual assistance at [piro-permits@noaa.gov](mailto:piro-permits@noaa.gov) or (808) 725-5190. Current fishing permit status is available at [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-permit-holders](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pacific-islands/resources-fishing/pacific-islands-permit-holders).

Permits as of August 2023:

Permit	Number
<b>Pelagic</b>	
Hawai'i longline (limited entry)	149 active, 15 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
<b>Hawai'i</b>	
Main Hawaiian Islands non-commercial bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	3 (shrimp)
<b>American Sāmoa</b>	
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Mariana Islands</b>	
Guam large vessel bottomfish	-
Northern Mariana Islands bottomfish	3
Special coral reef ecosystem	-

<b>Permit</b>	<b>Number</b>
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Pacific Remote Island Areas</b>	
Pelagic Troll & Handline	-
Bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious Coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Marine National Monument</b>	
Recreational Fishing	-
Recreational Charter	-