



**SSC Working Group on
Annual Prioritization of 2025-2029 MSRA Research Priorities
FINAL REPORT**

**Adopted by the SSC at its 153rd SSC Meeting
September 11-13, 2024**

SSC members Itano, Ochovillo, Kobayashi, Camacho, Chaloupka, and Severance comprised the working group tasked with selecting annual research priorities for 2025. Clay Tam and Eric Kingma participated, representing the Advisory Panels and Fishing Industry Advisory Committee, respectively. The research priorities were selected among the five-year MSRA research priorities recommended by the 152nd SSC and 199th Council Meeting. Priorities by program area (pelagic fisheries, island fisheries, protected species, and human communities) are identified below. Furthermore, the working group identified two priorities that are most important to be addressed in 2025, these are highlighted in bold. All priorities are linked to the five year priorities document adopted in the previous meeting cycle, enumerated in parentheses.

Pelagic Fisheries

- (1) Understanding the effects of spatial closures and large-scale marine protected areas on fisheries, island communities, and population dynamics on target and non-target species (PF2)

This priority addresses the need to evaluate proposed sanctuaries in Western Pacific Region and existing marine national monuments. It also informs how these closures affect fishery performance and efficiency of Western Pacific fisheries and to optimally utilize resources. It fulfills the lack of threat or risk assessments of commercial fishing in proposed sanctuary areas.

- (2) Mitigation of depredation and development of deterrents to reduce incidental interactions in U.S. Pacific Island fisheries (PF5)**

This priority goes towards reducing interactions with non-target species, especially sharks and false killer whales. This priority also addresses a need expressed by every council advisory group, where longline and non-longline fisheries have deep concerns over shark and false killer whale depredation events, alike. SSC members noted the recent WPSARs for bottomfish MUS included consistent complaints of shark depredation by fishermen.

Island Fisheries

- (1) Perform resource assessments including growth and recruitment, estimates of unreported catch, etc. to determine life history, population dynamics and connectivity information on MUS (IF2.1.2)

This research priority addresses the need for improving life history information for upcoming insular stock assessments.

Protected Species

- (1) Improved pelagic false killer whale assessments on the high seas with a focus of delineating full stock range based on robust biological data (PS2.2.1); and**
- (2) Development of tagging and other innovative approaches for improving species-specific post-release mortality estimate for false killer whales that interact with the Hawaii longline fishery (PS2.2.6)

False killer whale interactions in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery continues to be a high management priority, and development of robust abundance estimates and risk assessments for managing false killer whale interactions are needed. Both of these research priorities would also add realism to assessment assumptions.

- (3) Develop and test mitigation methods to reduce post-release mortality of oceanic whitetip shark and false killer whale interactions in small-boat fisheries (PS4.1.1); noting the urgency with oceanic whitetip sharks especially.

Incidental interactions with small-boat fisheries are thought to be rare but have the potential to significantly impact fishing communities through ESA and MMPA actions. Development of best practices to release oceanic whitetip sharks, false killer whales and other protected species in the event of accidental interactions would provide a proactive approach to conservation while balancing the needs of fishing communities.

Human Communities

- (1) Characterizing non-commercial vessels, participants, motivations, catch and effort (HC 1.1.2.); and
- (2) Improving estimations of the relative proportionality of commercial and noncommercial catch and effort (HC1.1.3)

Better understanding of fishery participation of commercial and non-commercial sectors continues to be a high priority for the region and is cross-cutting with important island fisheries management priorities. Improvement of non-commercial data collection (and interpretation) in Hawaii, Marianas, and American Samoa bottomfish fisheries is an immediate need, noting the recent changes in stock assessments for bottomfish. Further, the SSC noted the need for improvement of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) to discern non-commercial and recreational catch.

- (3) Understand product flow, price determination, demand structure, consumer preferences and non-market channels of fish distributions relationships with formal markets (HC 1.1.4), including origin of products

Unfair trade practices diminishing U.S. domestic fisheries in the Western Pacific Region have

been noted by the Council in recent meetings. The Council has highlighted the need to improve product labeling, traceability in the market, and to investigate influences of potential ‘dumping’ in U.S. market.

- (4) Assess the human dimensions of US Pacific Marine managed areas (such as area closures or MPAs) regarding procedural and distributive justice, transferred economic, social and ecological effects and safety. (HC 3.1.2)

This priority addresses monuments and sanctuaries, with a focus on a proposed sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Island Areas, disproportionately affecting American Samoa. The disproportionate burden faced by American Samoa has been noted by the Council as an Equity and Environmental Justice (EEJ) issue. It also compliments a Pelagic Fisheries research priority identified above.

The SSC working group recommends that the Council identify the following as the two highest priorities for NMFS and other agencies to address in 2025:

- **Improved pelagic false killer whale assessments on the high seas with a focus of delineating full stock range based on robust biological data (PS2.2.1)**
- **Inclusion of other available data, including tagging and acoustic data to fulfill the above priority to better discern information beyond the EEZ and among the range of the species where it overlaps with U.S. fisheries**
- **Mitigation of depredation and development of deterrents to reduce incidental interactions in U.S. Pacific Island fisheries (PF5)**
- **The above recommendations should be addressed between Council staff and NMFS staff to add specificity for tenable projects in 2025 conducted by NMFS and external entities.**