



PSMFC Annual Meeting Research Priorities Panel

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September 7-10, 2025
Boise, Idaho

Aloha, I am Kitty Simonds, Executive Director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council. This is our first time joining you at the Pac States and I am eager to provide you with an overview of our region and research priorities. We have worked closely with our advisory bodies, Plan Teams, SSC, Council members, and industry to develop these priorities. Many are longstanding and some have evolved with emerging policies and management needs.

I would like to give you some insight on our unique Pacific Islands region.

The Western Pacific Council represents the largest maritime footprint in the U.S. among all of the Councils. The region spans 1.5 million square nautical miles of EEZ across the State of Hawaii, Territories of American Samoa and Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the Pacific Remote Island Areas that make up the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument. Our region represents diverse demographics with over 75% of the population identifying as Pacific Islander, indigenous or Asian American. Across the region, the total population is about 1.7 million people, of which 1.45 million are in Hawaii and 250,000 are in the territories.

Key Fisheries

We are home to two major fishing ports in overall national value. Honolulu is ranked 6th with an estimated \$115 Million dockside value and Pago Pago is ranked 7th with about \$100 Million dockside value. Both are the largest tuna ports in the U.S.

The Hawaii longline fishery is our largest fishery with two sectors- the deep-set fishery for bigeye tuna and the shallow-set fishery for swordfish. 15-25 vessels will transition from deep-set to shallow-set, seasonally. The fishery is limited to 164 vessels and to 101 feet in total length. The fishery supplies nearly two-thirds of the U.S. domestic fresh bigeye and yellowfin tuna and over half of domestic swordfish.

The American Samoa longline fishery targets South Pacific albacore and the US purse seine fishery targets skipjack and both deliver to the StarKist cannery in Pago Pago harbor. Both the American Samoa and Hawaii longline fisheries are MSC certified. The Hawaii longliners and American Samoa purse seiners fish mostly on the high seas in competition with China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea.

Troll and handline fisheries are important in Hawaii and the territories for mainly pelagic species. Hook and line bottomfish fisheries are common in our region. In Hawaii, the bottomfish fishery is known as the “Deep 7” complex.

We develop ACLs taking into consideration scientific uncertainty through the P* and SEEM (social, economic, ecological and management working groups). This working group is made up of fishermen and social scientists and is unique to the Western Pacific.

Key Policy and Management Issues

The MSA should “trump” other applicable law!

Much of the management in our Region’s fisheries is driven by other applicable laws (OAL). In the Hawaii longline fishery, outcomes of ESA Biological Opinions have imposed punitive requirements and significant burden beyond recommendations by the Council, with little added conservation benefit to the listed species. The False Killer Whale Take Reduction Plan under the MMPA circumvented the Council process by expanding the longline exclusion zone set up by the Council.

Our region has shouldered the burden of the large marine national monuments created through Presidential Proclamations under the Antiquities Act. 52% of our EEZ is within Marine National Monument waters, closed to commercial fishing until recently. That is, until President Trump on April 17 restored commercial fishing from 50 to 200 nm in the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument, opening EEZs around Johnston Atoll near Hawaii and Jarvis Island closer to American Samoa. However on August 8, the U.S. District Court in Honolulu ruled that NMFS cannot repeal regulations prohibiting commercial fishing in the Monument without going through notice and comment rulemaking. The agency is in the process of following the court order to re-open these areas. While there are regulations in place beginning over 35 years ago, the Council will look at any other regulations that may be needed to meet the intent of the Presidential Proclamation.

We have provided our review of the remaining monuments in our region in response to Executive Order 14276, the “Seafood EO”.

Our diverse Pacific island fishing communities need assistance to maintain regional food security, sustain local traditions and develop their fisheries.

Our Hawaii and American Samoa longline fisheries are transitioning to electronic monitoring (EM) through 2027. (The implementation and success of this program rely on the fishermen. They are responsible for whatever happens on their vessels. They need to be protected) However, future funding from federal agencies to sustain the EM program, along with the human observer program, is uncertain. This could present voids in effective overall monitoring leaving our fishery open to lawsuits. Our small boat non-longline fisheries do not have the capacity at this time for data collection modernization using electronic technologies.

Overview of Current Top Research Gaps

Our Council's top research priorities address the science gaps - mitigating depredation across all of our fisheries; improving pelagic false killer whale assessments, evaluating large closed areas; improving non-commercial and commercial data reliability.

Depredation Mitigation

Management Context: Shark depredation continues to be an ongoing, escalating problem across all fisheries and needs to be a NOAA/NMFS priority.

At least 1 of 4 fishing trips result in a depredation event according to recent surveys - at times more than half of fishing trips. Our AP and SSC members and fishermen identified mitigation and development of deterrents to reduce these interactions as immediate priorities. The Council's IRA program identified shark depredation as the biggest obstacle for fishery performance, specifically for small boat fisheries.

The SHARKED Act acknowledges depredation as a national problem - calling for regional (including Councils) and national task forces to address the problem. Unless funds are appropriated by the Congress, I don't see this major problem addressed in the near future - unless NOAA/NMFS recognizes this issue as a priority.

Research Priorities: Research to date by University of Hawaii has focused on identification of involved species. PIFSC has surveyed frequency of depredation in some of the island areas. However, depredation and mitigation need to be added to their research agenda. To date, no work has been done to actually address reducing depredation by NOAA or academia. This has been a longstanding Council issue for more than a decade. We need cost-effective and practical mitigation strategies or deterrents to assist in fishery performance and to reduce the continuing economic loss.

Improve False Killer Whale Assessments

Management Context: False killer whale interactions in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery is one of the major protected species issues in our region, characterized by rare interactions and data limitations. Under the MMPA Take Reduction Plan, the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery is required to use “weak hooks” intended to straighten on the weight of a FKW but retain target bigeye tuna. However, difficulties with handling a large lively animal on the line and balancing crew safety have meant success rate has been less than 10%. The fishery is also subject to the Southern Exclusion Zone that closes about half of the available EEZ area to fishing when three interactions are observed.

Much of the challenges in managing FKW interactions stem from the “precautionary principle” embedded in the statutory language of the MMPA. This principle and the “zero mortality rate goal” contribute to the impractical protection standards that lead to unnecessary regulatory burdens on U.S. fisheries. For example, even though over 90% of the interactions result in the false killer whales being released alive, NMFS’ Serious Injury Determination Policy assumes that a false killer whale released alive with a hook left in its mouth is likely to die, and counts them against the fishery in the same manner as a dead animal.

Another challenge is that the pelagic false killer whale’s stock range extends beyond the EEZ around Hawaii. On the high seas portion of the stock range, where the species overlap with the longline fishery, NMFS has not done any systematic surveys. As a result, the population assessment of the pelagic stock relies on a habitat-based model using data that our SSC has determined to be “not fit for task”.

Research priorities: Given these challenges, the Council has been urging the PIFSC to **improve pelagic false killer whale assessments throughout its range and especially on the high seas where it overlaps with U.S. fisheries.** We have asked the Science Center for many years to **develop innovative tagging approaches or other data collection methods to generate species-specific post-release mortality estimates for false killer whales** that interact with our fishery.

Evaluating Large Spatial Closures

Management Context: Large spatial closures were established in our region for longline vessels beginning in 1991. Yet our region is also subject to large Marine National Monuments that have not been analyzed for their intended objectives since they were first established in 2006. The disproportionate burden faced by our communities, especially the American Samoa economy and Hawaii as well, has been conveyed to previous administrations by the Council prior to the President’s Proclamation.

Research Priorities: Given the history of large scale closures and regional reliance on fisheries, there is the need to evaluate monuments and sanctuaries. We need to know how these closures affect fishery performance and efficiency of Western Pacific fisheries to achieve optimal yields and utilize resources. It fulfills the lack of threat or risk assessments of commercial fishing. NMFS needs to evaluate the impacts to target and non-target species alike. Our SSC and advisory members identified the need to assess the human dimensions of our closed areas and MPAs regarding “procedural and distributive justice”, transferred economic, social, ecological effects, and safety.

Commercial and Non-Commercial Data

Management Context: Our regional data collection systems were built prior to MSA mandates such as ACLs in 2011. For example, Hawaii established its CML and reporting system in 1948; territorial creel surveys were established in 1981; and HMRFS began in 2003. Despite efforts to tweak these systems to provide better data for stock assessments and ACL specifications, the region continues to be data limited. New approaches to data collection and stock assessment in our region, such as the length-based “Tier 6” approach proposed by the Council may help. But we still need improved length composition data and to understand the relatively unknown universe of non-commercial fishing. Currently there is heavy reliance on creel surveys in territories which are limited due to manpower and budgets.

Research Priorities: We need better understanding of fishery participation of commercial and non-commercial sectors for the region. This is cross-cutting with important island fisheries management priorities.

Using traditional stock assessment is difficult because of poor estimates of total catch and highly unreliable CPUE indices. Electronic Technologies like cell phone apps could be useful, however, many of these fisheries lack that capacity at this time.

Socioeconomic surveys in the region are infrequent (every 5 years or so) and subject to soft money type of project proposals that may or not be funded.

Our SSC members noted the need for improvement of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) to characterize non-commercial and recreational catch that remains highly uncertain. This proportion would provide a basis for allocations.

Other WP Region Research Needs

Our region does not have ecosystem status reports like the work done in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Basic monitoring is not fully funded with regularity, such as economic cost-earnings surveys.

Cooperative Research Programs (CRP) provide “more bang for the buck” - integrating fishermen, developing relationships between science and management, and increasing at-sea monitoring capabilities. One example would be contracting fishermen with smaller vessels to increase coverage area of false killer whale surveys simultaneously, as opposed to the current strategy using expensive white ships that cover a smaller area at one point in time, reduce sampling capabilities, and take years to actually happen!

Mahalo, Fa’afetai, Si Yu’os Ma’a’e

Council Members and I look forward to continuing working w/the new Administration on an organizational culture change within Commerce/NOAA/NMFS/NOS. The past is the past, yes?