Report for the 205th Council Meeting

Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center

Department of Commerce | National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration | National Marine Fisheries Service

Major Activities Since 204th Council Meeting

The following highlights a few key accomplishments since the last Council meeting that are most relevant to Council interests. The list is shorter than usual, as a significant portion of time during this period was lost due to the government shutdown and does not reflect all the important accomplishments by the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) staff during the time period.

1. **Bottomfish fishery-independent survey Hawaii (BFISH)** – the Cooperative Research survey, conducted on chartered commercial Hawaii bottomfish vessels, was conducted from August 31 to November 8, 2025. The 2025 survey comprised 465 stratified-random fishing grids covering all eight of the main Hawaiian islands. Over 500 biosamples were collected, the majority of which are Deep7 species, with opakapaka dominating the catch. This year was instrumental for Deep 7 life history collections, providing important samples needed for our updated opakapaka life history evaluation currently underway and for collecting life history samples for rare species including Hapuʻupuʻu and Lehi.

2. **Assessing impact of foreign fleets on false killer whales** – Since the last Council meeting, a peer-reviewed paper was published that builds on initial exploratory work previously discussed with the SSC regarding non-U.S. fishing impacts on Hawaiʻi pelagic false killer whales. The study integrates high-resolution Global Fishing Watch data with RFMO effort data to more accurately apportion foreign longline activity within the expanded assessment area. The final analysis shows that non-U.S. fleets contributed about 9% of longline effort from 2012–2023, resulting in an estimated 1.3–4.7 interactions per year. This publication provides a robust, scientifically vetted foundation for incorporating non-U.S. fishing impacts into the pelagic false killer whale Stock Assessment Report (SAR).

3. **Marianas small boat surveys –** The PIFSC SEES Program, in collaboration with Propel/Lynker, completed the 2025 Marianas Small Boat cost-earnings survey implementation at the end of September. A total of 275 surveys were completed (115 from the CNMI and 160 from Guam). These surveys advance our understanding of the current economics of small boat fishing in Marianas, document the valuable social and cultural benefits of fishing (including fish flow and local food security), and provide updated baselines from previous surveys completed in 2018 and 2011. PIFSC plans to have fact sheets with preliminary results available by Spring 2026.

FY26 PIFSC Science Enterprise Priorities

The following items outline the key priorities for the PIFSC for the upcoming year, subject to available budgets and the emergence of additional priorities. This section highlights strategic initiatives and projects that are anticipated to be a focal point in the year ahead. It is important to note that this overview does not encompass the full range of core functions—such as stock assessments, field work, and routine analyses—that will continue to be undertaken throughout the year. These essential activities, which form the backbone of PIFSC's operations, will proceed alongside the priorities listed herein.

1. IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ELECTRONIC MONITORING PROGRAM IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

We will continue to support the transition to electronic monitoring (EM) in regional longline fisheries as our Center's highest priority. This includes phasing in an operational EM Program including outfitting vessels with camera systems, developing review and analysis protocols for video, and continuing the development of analytical tools necessary to support fishery monitoring requirements under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), and Endangered Species Act (ESA). FY26 efforts will focus on instrumenting the Hawai'i longline fishery and advancing international fisheries standards on electronic monitoring.

2. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL FOCUS

In FY26, the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) will implement projects supporting our primary jurisdictions—Hawai'i, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa. These initiatives align with our strategic plan goal to foster a workforce that is more reflective, proactive, and transparent in our commitment to ensuring positive outcomes for science based fisheries management across the Pacific Islands.

American Samoa:

- Initiate a fishing effort and catch census with DMWR in line with the recommendations and outcome of the FY25 FDCRC.
- Conduct multidisciplinary surveys for *Isopora crateriformis* and *Acropora globiceps* in American Samoa. Activities will include reimaging fixed sites to track demographic rates, conducting targeted heat stress experiments to assess thermal tolerance, and integrating genetic sampling to assess resilience. These efforts will generate foundational data to inform species status reviews, recovery planning, and climate resilience strategies.

CNMI: Complete analysis of the FY25 fishery-independent survey and biosampling and provide updates to the CNMI DLNR / DFW and community, including next steps for a benchmark stock assessment.

Guam: Implement a new PIFSC designed framework for Selecting Stock Assessment Strategies in the Pacific Islands Region. PIFSC scientists provided a community engagement workflow for selecting stock assessment groupings and models, this workflow was reviewed by the SSC and endorsed by the WPFMC. The framework will be applied to the current 13 BMUS.

Hawai'i:

- PIFSC will revise the species distribution model providing an updated density surface for Hawaii pelagic false killer whales, incorporating new survey information and an updated model approach, ensuring that the stock is managed based on the most current survey data and robust model outputs.
- PIFSC will continue a research track assessment to review the data available and evaluate changes for the Deep 7 bottomfish assessment.

- PIFSC will develop a framework for decadal outlooks and next-century climate projections for the Hawaiian Islands at a regional scale.
- PIFSC will develop novel approaches for the detection, tracking, and eradication of aquatic invasive species in marine habitats.

International: Advance assessment and bycatch mitigation of critically endangered West Pacific leatherback turtles by strengthening nesting, direct-take, and bycatch data collection and pipelines in collaboration with international partners. This will enable robust population modeling, while testing next-generation satellite tag anchor systems to evaluate post-bycatch mortality and spatial ecology—science that is critical to Hawai'i longline fisheries management decisions.

Emerging: Advance ecosystem-based management by identifying and prioritizing research needs to support sustainable fisheries management in areas potentially affected by deep sea mining. These efforts will guide environmental monitoring and data collection, enabling interagency coordination and informed management across all ocean sectors.

3. CONDUCT MAJOR SURVEYS

In FY26, PIFSC will conduct major surveys[1] under the authorities of the MSA, MMPA, ESA, and Coral Reef Conservation Act to support ecosystem-based management. These surveys will focus on monitoring fishery stocks, assessing the status of protected species, and gathering critical ecosystem data. The results will inform sustainable management practices, support species conservation efforts, and enhance our understanding of the marine environment to ensure the health and resilience of Pacific Islands' marine resources.

- **WHICEAS:** Winter Hawaiian Islands Cetacean and Ecosystem Assessment Survey. This critical survey collects data on cetacean distribution and abundance, with particular attention to false killer whales (FKW), to meet Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA) assessment mandates. January 24th - March 31, 2026.

- **BFISH -** the Bottomfish fishery-independent survey for the main Hawaiian Islands and Guam will include research fishing grids (abundance) and collect biosamples (life history information) to inform assessments and catch limits for the bottomfish fisheries in Hawaii (~Aug. - Nov. 2026) and Guam (~June - Sept. 2026).

- **NCRMP** - the National Coral Reef Monitoring Program will conduct ecosystem surveys in American Samoa and the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument. April 15 - July 30, 2026.

- **PIRIS** - Nighttime IKMT tows around American Samoa during the return transit from NCRMP surveys aboard the NOAA ship Oscar Elton Sette.

[1] Survey activities may change due to a number of factors external to PIFSC, including but not limited to available funding and days at sea allocated to PIFSC surveys in the NOAA Fleet Allocation Plan.

- **American Samoa Insular Bottomfish and Life History Survey** - The Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division, onboard the NOAA Ship R/V Oscar Sette, will conduct a bottomfish fishery-independent survey and life history biosampling around the inhabited islands and offshore banks. A series of Bottomfish Constituents Workshop will be held to design the standardized fishing gear and consult on the research grids. This research survey will include American Samoa bottomfish fishers and staff from the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources. June 15 - 29, 2026.

- **NWHI Monk Seal and Turtle Survey**s will assess and recover populations in Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument, focusing on habitat loss impacts, data gaps from recent limited surveys, and improving future survey efficiency. April - September, 2026.

4. CONDUCT STOCK ASSESSMENTS

In FY26, PIFSC will conduct several stock assessments for both domestically and for internationally managed species under the Western Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

- **American Samoa BMUS:** PIFSC will conduct an update assessment for the 6 bottomfish management unit species in April 2026.

- **Pacific Blue Marlin:** PIFSC scientist will lead the assessment under the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean in June 2026.

- **Bigeye and Yellowfin Tuna:** PIFSC scientists will provide the data and scientific support for the assessments led by the SPC in August 2026.

- **Pacific Bluefin Tuna:** A peer-review chaired by Dr. Rob Ahrens (PIFSC scientist) will be held by the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean in March 2026.