



Report for the 206th Council Meeting

**Pacific Islands
Fisheries Science Center**

Introduction

This document represents the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center's original FY2026 priorities framework. It will be reissued to the Council on a quarterly basis, with the opening section highlighting major activities and accomplishments since the previous Council meeting that are most relevant to Council interests. The latter section maintains the Center's FY2026 priority areas and will be updated each quarter with progress milestones so that Council members can track advancement on Council-relevant priorities throughout the year. New milestones or updates since the previous version are indicated in **bolded blue font** to facilitate easy tracking of progress.

Major Activities Since 205th Council Meeting

1. **Passive acoustic underwater glider challenge complete** - PIFSC, SWFSC, and several partner CIs and companies carried out a capabilities assessment for several PAM-equipped underwater gliders in early-February. The goal of this 2 week effort was to compare the capabilities of both the glider platform and the PAM data acquisition system while navigating through 4 operational modes. The challenge included 8 underwater gliders, including 2 different Seaglider forms, 3 Slocum gliders with different PAM systems, 2 Hefring Oceanscouts, and an Alseamar SeaExplorer. The results of this first-of-its-kind effort will inform NMFS transition to uncrewed vehicle for cetacean surveys and evaluation of where UMS can augment other priority sampling needs.
2. **WHICEAS underway**- The PIFSC Cetacean Research Program is presently fielding the winter Hawaiian Islands Cetacean and Ecosystem Assessment Survey in the main Hawaiian Islands. This survey, continuing through March, is designed to provide the data needed to assess the seasonal abundance of migratory large whales, and provide additional data for other species, including false killer whales. This survey is accompanied by a passive acoustic glider survey of the same study area with the goal of comparing the magnitude and distribution of species detections on each platform to inform future transitions toward uncrewed survey missions.
3. **American Samoa Bottomfish Fisheries and Life History Survey Constituents Meeting** - A team from the Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division (FRMD) completed a series of meetings and workshops in American Samoa in partnership with the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR). The goals of the agency and community engagement were to lay the foundation for the upcoming bottomfish fishery independent survey and life history sampling on board the NOAA Ship Oscar Elton Sette in June 2026 and improvements in the fishery dependent data collection. A Small Boat Fisheries Constituents Meeting was held on February 10, 2026, which included participation by 14 fishers from the commercial alia and non-commercial fisheries and 10 staff from DMWR. Fishers shared their knowledge of deep water snapper distribution to refine the research survey area and expressed strong support in providing life history samples. The team also held a Bottomfish Survey Workshop the following day, during which 12 fishers shared their fishing gear configuration to help design the standardized gear. They also provided more detailed information on the fishing areas, spatial distribution of fish biomass, and species specific life history traits. Concurrent to these

efforts, FRMD staff also partnered with DMWR Shore-based Creel Survey staff to document the creel survey protocol and joined the staff on their survey at the east side of the island. The information gathered will be used for the MRIP certification of the shore-based creel. The team also met with DMWR to discuss the outcomes from the fisher engagement events and planned for a follow up data collection improvement workshop and the longer term collection of biological samples.



American Samoa Bottomfish Constituents Meeting at the Tradewinds Naumati Conference Room on February 10, 2026.

4. **Deployment of new Electronic Monitoring (EM) Systems on 10 voluntary Hawaii Longline Vessels** - Staff from PIFSC FRMD recently launched the Hawaii longline Electronic Monitoring (EM) Early Access Program in February 2026 by beginning installation of new EM camera systems on 10 volunteer Hawaii longline vessels. From February 16–20, FRMD staff supported technicians by removing older EM systems and installing the new hardware, including wiring, cameras, sensors, and onboard computers. The team was able to equip six vessels with new EM systems and is in the process of installation on the remaining four vessels. Each of the 10 vessels has signed a voluntary agreement which will allow EM data to be used for fishery management purposes. This initiative is a first step in the deployment of EM systems and the broader overall implementation of EM in the Pacific Islands Region. This early collaboration with volunteer vessels demonstrates strong stakeholder support for expanded EM use in the Hawaii longline fishery.



(Left) FRMD staff confirming the deck camera view during the new EM system installation (Right) FRMD staff with industry vessel owners and operators of F/V Captain Remo discussing bringing EM into the Hawaii longline fishery and their participation in the new EM early adopter program.

FY26 PIFSC Science Enterprise Priorities - Updates

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.

PRIORITY UPDATE: See narrative above on the most recent milestone.

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.

PRIORITY UPDATE: PIFSC/CIMAR scientists successfully completed a second set of ESA coral surveys around American Samoa including collected data on growth/mortality and heat stress response of *Acropora globiceps* and *Isopora crateriformis* colonies. The long-term goal of this collaboration is to build a predictive bleaching model that allows scientists and managers to non-destructively assess thermal tolerance in healthy corals in situ, without running heat-stress experiments, thus substantially increasing management applicability. The team is also developing an Automated Image Classifier for ESA Corals in American Samoa. CRAG generously shared 4,200 photoquad images from long-term monitoring sites in Tutuila and the Manu'a Islands for the PIFSC/CIMAR team to use in beta-test an operational AI tool for identifying these two ESA-listed coral species from benthic imagery. This tool will streamline data extraction and help managers track and monitor these important species using benthic images.



The ESA Corals Team met with NOAA Fisheries, CRAG, DMWR, NPS, and NMSAS to share progress to date and outline next steps. They presented the experimental approach and preliminary insights, as well as a one-page project summary in English

and Samoan. Members of CRAG and DMWR also assisted during one of the heat stress experiments and .

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 surveys¹ 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

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.

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 and during the return transit from NCRMP surveys aboard the NOAA ship Oscar Elton Sette.
- **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. 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 Surveys** will assess and recover populations in Papahānaumokuākea 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.

- **PRIORITY UPDATE: American Samoa BMUS and Main Hawaiian Islands Deep 7 Bottomfish:** PIFSC will conduct an update assessment for the 6 bottomfish management unit species in American Samoa scheduled for a tier 2 WPSAR in May 2026 and the main Hawaiian islands deep 7 bottomfish for review in December 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.