

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
808-522-8220
Fax: 808-522-8226
www.wpcouncil.org

Management Update – March 2005

Protected Species Conservation

In 2004, the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council continued to implement management changes to reduce and mitigate interactions between Hawaii-based longline vessels and protected species such as sea turtles and seabirds. Based on cooperative research conducted with Hawaii's longline fishery, the Western Pacific Council strengthened protection for seabirds by extending and increasing current measures to include either the use of bird scaring streamer lines (tori lines), or the use of a fishing technique termed side-setting, which appears to virtually eliminate these seabird interactions. This requirement is anticipated to virtually eliminate seabird interactions with this fishery.

As a result of similar cooperative research in the Atlantic longline fishery conducted on sea turtles, the Western Pacific Council now requires Hawaii-based longline vessels to use circle hooks and mackerel-type bait when targeting swordfish. This gear combination was found to significantly reduce sea turtle interactions in the Atlantic and is now being used in a model Hawaii swordfish fishery. Through these efforts, swordfish landings in Honolulu resumed in early 2005. This model fishery is limited to only half the annual number of longline sets as previously used in the fishery. However, as these new techniques are proven effective, the Council will work to export the new methods to the international fishing community.

In 2004, the Western Pacific Council also expanded its sea turtle management and conservation efforts in the Pacific. Working closely with the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS, also known as NOAA Fisheries) Pacific Islands Regional Office and Science Center, numerous sea turtle conservation and management projects were implemented as recommended at the Western Pacific Council's 2002 Sea Turtle Cooperative Research and Management Workshop and subsequent meetings of its Sea Turtle Advisory Committee. These early efforts have allowed the Western Pacific Council to create and foster critical linkages with key international organizations. Today, the Western Pacific Council and NMFS directly support "on the beach" sea turtle conservation projects, the export of environmentally responsible fishing practices to other fishing nations, and continued networking between international agencies, organizations and industry. As a result, Hawaii has emerged as a recognized center of excellence in protected species research and conservation.

Fishery interactions with marine mammals are the most recent issue to be addressed by the Western Pacific Council. In 2004 the Hawaii-based longline fleet was reclassified under the Marine Mammal Protection Act as a Category 1 fishery believed to significantly interact with marine mammals (it was previously classified as a Category 3 fishery with a remote likelihood of interactions). The reclassification was based on 10 interactions with false killer whales between 1994 to 2002, and a population assessment for this species based on a NMFS line survey around the Hawaiian Archipelago. NMFS considers the Hawaii sub-population a strategic stock and has estimated there are 268 false killer whales in this population. In 2004 the Western Pacific Council formed a Marine Mammal Advisory Committee to advise the Council on measures that could be implemented to minimize further fishery interactions with false killer whales.

Ecosystem Management

During 2004 the Western Pacific Council and its partners continued working to implement ecosystem-based fishery management plans for the region's fisheries. The Council's Coral Reef Ecosystems Fishery Management Plan was the Nation's first such plan and was implemented in 2004. The Western Pacific Council is now transforming its remaining existing multi-species Fishery Management Plans into archipelago-based fishery ecosystem plans.

As a part of this process, strategies are being assessed for developing and implementing archipelagic-based demersal fishery ecosystem plans for each of the Council's major island areas (the Samoa Archipelago, the Mariana Archipelago, and the Hawaii Archipelago). A pilot project is underway in the Mariana Archipelago that is anticipated to lay the groundwork for the implementation of each of the archipelagic-based demersal fishery ecosystem plans. A presentation of this project will be made at the 2005 Conference.

Also being evaluated are means by which to integrate ecosystem-based principles into the existing multi-species pelagic fishery management plan to establish a Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan that considers the full range of these highly migratory species. The Council is also convening two workshops in April 2005 concerned with ecosystem-based (EB) approaches to fishery management. The first is a coastal fishery management workshop, co-hosted by the Council, Secretariat of the Pacific Community and FAO, for fishery managers from the Pacific Islands, which includes EB approaches to fishery management as one of its major themes. The second meeting is a workshop on the development of EB approaches to marine resource management. The overarching workshop objective is the identification of the science requirements to support ecosystem-based (EB) approaches to marine resource management and the development of EB approaches in the Western Pacific Region.

International Management Issues

The Western Pacific Council is intimately involved with the process of international fishery management across the Pacific. Successful management of pelagic tunas, billfish and other migratory species, such as mahimahi and ono, requires extensive data sharing and cooperation between fishing nations. International management arrangements have become the engine driving pelagic resource management in the Pacific. Tuna stocks in the Eastern Tropical Pacific Ocean, to the west of 150 deg W have been managed for over half a century by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC). More recently during 2004, a new international fishery management authority, the Western & Central Pacific Fishery Commission came into force and held its first meeting in Pohnpei, Micronesia with active participation by the Western Pacific Council. This Commission is anticipated to play an important role in the international management and conservation of pelagic fish stocks.

An immediate international and domestic issue is to address overfishing of bigeye tuna stocks in the Pacific. The Secretary of Commerce has determined that overfishing of Pacific bigeye tuna is occurring Pacific-wide and, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Council must take action to address overfishing within one year. Recent stock assessments for bigeye tuna in the Eastern and Western Pacific suggest that this stock is being fished at unsustainably high levels. The stock itself is not yet overfished, but could become so if fishing mortality is not reduced. This will likely require scaling back of the longline fishing effort directed at catching bigeye tuna, and reducing catches of juvenile bigeye by purse seine vessels. Bigeye catches by fisheries under the Council's jurisdiction in 2003 amounted to 4000 mt, or about 2% of the Pacific-wide total of 189,000 mt. To effectively reduce fishing mortality on bigeye tuna will require management action at the international level, and any unilateral action by US fisheries will have little effect on the stock as a whole.

Other international mechanisms have also been implemented to address the conservation of sea turtles, including the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles, and the

Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia Memorandum of Understanding for Turtle Conservation. Over the next year the Council, Regional Office and Science Center will stay fully engaged in the deliberations of these commissions.

Recreational Fishery Monitoring

Four years ago the Western Pacific Council evaluated existing fishery monitoring programs throughout its region. The evaluation confirmed that most of the fishery monitoring programs in place are fishery dependent, meaning that they rely on data collected from fishing operations. In addition, there is a data gap regarding the recreational fishing sector, especially in Hawaii. After a twenty year hiatus, the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistics Survey was reestablished in Hawaii, through a collaboration between NMFS and the Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources, and in 2004 provided preliminary recreational fishery statistics for some fisheries. Recreational bottomfish fishery in Hawaii remains a significant data gap and limits a fishery manager's ability to fully monitor the status of these important fishery resources. The Western Pacific Council has focused its efforts at improving existing information collection programs for this fishery. After a series of public fishers forums centered on the recreational bottomfish fishery, the Council now developing targeted surveys of the known 1,600 recreational bottomfish fishers in Hawaii. The Council is working to improve the information base and programs through which biological, economic, social and ecological information is collected on all fisheries within its jurisdiction. This information will greatly improve evaluations of the status of fisheries, and will assist the Council in both developing appropriate management measures and assessing the impacts of those measures on the environment.

Interagency Coordination

Are NMFS and the Councils truly charged with the management and conservation of fisheries as indicated in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA)? This simple question has arisen as a result of the designation of National Marine Sanctuaries throughout the Nation. The Western Pacific and other Regional Fishery Management Councils have been assisting the National Marine Sanctuary Program in their efforts to establish these sanctuaries. The Western Pacific Council sees the Sanctuary designation process as an opportunity to establish a coordinated process to better manage the Nation's marine resources. Although many feel that policy development for fisheries is an open public process that is well established and should continue under the MSA, the National Marine Sanctuary Program and its Sanctuary Advisory Councils can provide management responsibilities for non-fishery management issues and thus provide a comprehensive resource management regime. Supporting Under-Secretary Admiral Lautenbacher's vision of building a "Corporate NOAA," the Western Pacific Council has proposed that a Memorandum of Agreement be created with NOAA (including the National Marine Sanctuary Program) and the Councils to provide a formal, open, participatory and science-based process for cooperatively developing and promulgating fishing regulations for all sanctuaries. Such a process has been shown to facilitate the exchange and use of information, advice, technical assistance, and expertise between agency partners and the public.

Over the past two years, the Western Pacific Council has also been actively participating in planning the continued development of NOAA's newly formed Pacific Islands Region. Coordinated efforts between the Pacific Islands Regional Office, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, Office of Law Enforcement and Western Pacific Council have produced a joint Pacific Islands Region Strategic Plan Summary that was released in March 2004. That document summarized the Region's major programmatic and administrative goals as well as providing associated budgets and is available on the Council's website (www.wpcouncil.org). Staff are now finalizing the complete Strategic Plan that will be released by May 2005. The complete plan will provide additional details on the Region's mission, goals and major work elements and will include input from partner agencies as well as external stakeholders.