

NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center

Response to questions concerning Hawaii's bottomfish populations

10/27/2005

There's been considerable interest recently about the status of bottomfish in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). We'd like to clear the record in terms of the scientific judgments from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). And in brief, the populations of snappers, groupers and jacks (aka, bottomfish) in the NWHI are fine. Bottomfish in the NWHI are not over-fished and the level of fishing effort (fishing days) is within the established targets as determined by Federal guidelines.

Our scientists are confident that bottomfish in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands remain in good condition based on over twenty five years of monitoring, biological research and stock assessments. None of the indicators NOAA monitors suggests there is excessive fishing mortality (which in plain English means too much fishing) nor that the bottomfish stocks in the NWHI are depressed.

To give just a couple of examples from the *Mau* zone, the limited entry zone that stretches from Nihoa Island (west of Kauai) to Necker Island: the average size of fish has not changed substantially (opakapaka, pink snapper, were 10.3 pounds per fish in 1988 and 10.1 pounds in 2003), and the percentage in the catch which are immature (not yet able to spawn) has gone down over the same time period (24.9% down to 14.5% for *hapuupuu*, a grouper). All of these are good indications that bottomfish in the NWHI are alright. Total catch and catch per unit effort has gone up and down, but that is what is expected in fisheries. The more complex stock assessment models give the same picture of healthy populations of bottomfish in the NWHI. For more details, please visit our website at:

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www.PIFSC.NOAA.gov/Bottomfish

By our stock assessment parameters, the NWHI fisheries are hitting their targets. Of course we would acknowledge there is uncertainty in any fisheries assessment, and Hawaii's bottomfish are no exception, but we believe there is sufficient information on which to make rational, science-based decisions concerning these fisheries. But to manage and reduce the uncertainty in our work, we have established precautionary measures in the assessment process. And to ensure the quality and integrity of our science, we have invited independent academic experts to undertake their own assessments of this fishery and our methods. We are sure to gain from them in the kind of exchange that makes science what it is, a process of discovery and testing.

And please be clear, NOAA Fisheries has expressed concern about the status of bottomfish stocks in the main Hawaiian Islands for over ten years, and there are serious conservation issues to address concerning these stocks. We appreciate the State's efforts to implement closures in 1998, but now NOAA Fisheries has indicated that Federal action in the main Hawaiian Islands is appropriate. We are also concerned with the idea that closing the NWHI bottomfish fishery will have a positive impact on the MHI – this is very unlikely to be the case and may ultimately prove negative for the entire archipelago bottomfish population.

Finally, some critics are using a novel approach, applying a definition of “ecosystem integrity” to fisheries management which has not been rigorously defined and which has not been tested by population dynamics experts. The target levels for the NWHI bottomfish fishery that are also being challenged are those that are inscribed by the guidelines implementing the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Federal legislation governing fishery management decisions. While one could define ecosystem integrity only as those with unfished stocks of fish, we believe this is not useful. Ecosystems can still maintain their ecological

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integrity (which might be viewed as their integrated viability) while still being fished. Almost all evidence on the NWHI ecosystems suggests that such integrity continues to exist and indeed thrive, despite decades of fishing in this region.

At the same time, reasonable people can differ on the level of protection to be afforded the NWHI ecosystem as a whole. But this is quite different from the over-fishing questions. While we respect this recent interest in Hawaii's bottomfish, the approach of these critics is simply inconsistent with nationally-accepted methodologies for evaluating the status of fisheries throughout the United States.

We hope this helps put the record straight about NOAA's biological assessments of these fisheries.

-- Samuel G. Pooley, director

