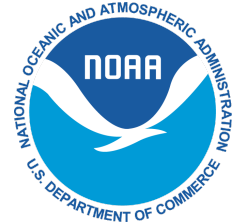


**National Marine Fisheries Service  
Pacific Islands Regional Office**

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**REPORT TO THE 199th  
WESTERN PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL MEETING**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) is responsible for assisting the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) in the development of fishery management plans and amendments, initiating Federal fishing regulations, issuing Federal fishing permits, and monitoring fisheries. Other major responsibilities include the conservation and recovery of protected species, conservation and restoration of marine habitats, including the Pacific marine national monuments, and coordination with international organizations to implement fishery agreements and treaties. The following information is provided to update the Council on NMFS activities since the 198th Council meeting.

**SPOTLIGHT - High Seas Boarding and Inspections, Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission**

Under Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) authority, member nations are authorized to conduct high seas boarding and inspections (HSBI) to assess compliance with WCPFC Conservation and Management Measures. Vessels flagged to the United States and participating in a fishery covered by the WCPFC convention are required to comply with boarding and inspections conducted by all authorized WCPFC inspectors in accordance with the regulations at 50 CFR 300.221(b). An authorized WCPFC HSBI inspector is expected to: clearly identify themselves as an inspector; not interfere in any communication between the vessel captain and authorities of the fishing vessel; collect and document any evidence of violations of WCPFC measures; provide a copy of the inspection report to the vessel captain; and complete the inspection within four hours, unless a serious violation is identified. A vessel captain is expected to: avoid any risks to safety of the authorized inspection vessel and inspectors; facilitate safe boarding by inspectors; cooperate with the inspection and the inspector's requirements; allow the inspectors to communicate with the crew and authorities of their inspection vessel as well as with the authorities of the vessel being inspected; and provide inspectors with reasonable facilities, and facilitate safe disembarkation.

Recently, the People's Republic of China (PRC) submitted a notice of intent to the WCPFC to conduct HSBI. The United States, as a Contracting Party to the WCPFC, has encouraged fellow Contracting Parties to join the efforts to ensure that members' fishing vessels and fishing support vessels are abiding by the WCPFC conservation and management measures. As such, U.S. flagged vessels are expected to cooperate fully in authorized high seas boardings and inspections by any authorized nation, including the PRC.

## **RULEMAKING**

On March 1, 2024, NMFS published a final rule to modify seabird mitigation measures in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery. The rule requires federally permitted Hawaii deep-set longline vessels that set fishing gear from the stern to use a tori line (i.e., bird scaring streamer) in place of the formerly required thawed, blue-dyed bait and strategic offal (i.e., fish, fish parts, or spent bait) discharge when fishing above 23° N latitude. This action is expected to improve the overall efficacy and operational practicality of required seabird mitigation measures by reducing seabird bycatch and creating operational and administrative efficiency for fishermen and NMFS. The rule became effective on April 1, 2024.

On May 1, 2024, NMFS published a notice announcing the availability of 34 American Sāmoa pelagic longline limited entry permits in two permit size classes for 2024. NMFS must receive complete permit applications, including payment, by August 29, 2024.

On May 7, 2024, NMFS published a final rule to specify an annual catch limit (ACL) of 30,802 lb, annual catch target (ACT) of 25,491 lb, and accountability measures (AM) for main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) Kona crab for fishing years 2024, 2025, and 2026. The rule will not change the current AM for the MHI Kona crab fishery. NMFS will close Federal waters to Kona crab fishing for the remainder of the fishing year if NMFS projects the fishery will reach the ACT. NMFS will reduce the ACT and ACL in the subsequent fishing year by the overage amount if landings exceed the ACL in a fishing year. The rule is intended to support the long-term sustainability of the MHI Kona crab fishery, and is effective June 6, 2024.

On May 7, 2024, NMFS published a notice of agency decision that announced the approval of Amendments to the five fishery ecosystem plans (FEP) for fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region. The FEPs were amended to update data collection mechanisms identified as standardized bycatch reporting methodologies (SBRM) and to revise descriptions of SBRM for consistency with current NMFS regulations. These Amendments ensure conformance with national guidance for compliance with the SBRM requirement in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. There were no changes to regulations or reporting requirements associated with the Amendments.

On May 14, 2024, NMFS published a proposed rule to issue protective regulations under section 4(d) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for the conservation of the threatened oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*). The proposed rule would extend all Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 9(a)(1) prohibitions to the species, with limited exceptions for scientific research and law enforcement activities. Under the ESA, prohibitions listed under section 9(a)(1) of the ESA automatically apply when a species is listed as endangered, but not when a species is listed as threatened. The oceanic whitetip shark was listed as a threatened species in 2018 largely due to population declines caused by incidental bycatch in commercial fisheries (particularly pelagic longlines, purse seines, and gillnets), illegal international trade of oceanic whitetip shark fins, and inadequate regulatory mechanisms to address these threats. While several regulations control for overutilization of oceanic whitetip sharks in U.S. waters, retention of oceanic whitetip sharks is not prohibited in all gear types or

fisheries, and other forms of take beyond retention are not prohibited. NMFS is soliciting comments, information, and/or recommendations on this proposed rule through July 15, 2024.

On May 23, 2024 NMFS published a proposed rule to implement an ACL of 82,000 lb and ACT of 75,000 lb for bottomfish in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) for fishing years 2024 and 2025. The rule would not change the current AM for the fishery, where NMFS would reduce the ACL and ACT in the following fishing year by the amount of the overage if the average catch from the most recent 3 years exceeds the ACL. This proposed rule would support the long-term sustainability of the CNMI bottomfish fishery.

On May 29, 2024, NMFS published a proposed rule to shorten fish aggregating device (FAD) closure periods in the WCPFC area for U.S. purse seine fishing vessels. The proposed rule would implement a recent WCPFC decision, and would change existing FAD closure periods from three months to one-and-a-half months for the entire WCPFC area. The proposed rule would also change existing FAD closure periods on the high seas in the WCPFC area from two months – November and December – to just the month of December. The comment period on the proposed rule will end on June 13, 2024.

## **PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

### **Directorate**

On April 9-11, 2024, PIRO, the NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC), and the Council co-hosted the 6th Collaborative Climate Workshop. This workshop, the first with a management focus, provided an opportunity to increase participants' understanding of how management is informed by, and guides, climate data collection and research questions relative to the full spectrum of NMFS equities in the Pacific Islands region. The workshop challenged participants to think creatively, outside their usual channels, and to find ways to work together to try to mitigate the impacts of climate change in our region.

### **Habitat Conservation**

In the last three months, NMFS has completed 10 individual essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations, as well as 11 EFH consultations reviewed using multiple programmatic consultations. The individual consultations included, but were not limited to: O'ahu's Ala Wai Watershed Flood Control Improvements; U.S. Air Force Construction of New Base Facilities and Aircraft Parking Apron at Wake Island; Mariana Trench Marine National Monument Management Plan; Ham Radio Operations at Jarvis Island; NOAA's Office of Exploration and Research for 2024 – 2026 Beyond the Blue Campaign; and University of Guam Coral Transplant Plates.

NMFS continues to coordinate closely with USFWS on National Marine Monuments in the Pacific Islands region. The third term of Marianas Trench Marine National Monument Advisory Council (MTMAC) held an in-person meeting in Saipan, CNMI on May 8-9, 2024. The main outcome of the meeting was the MTMAC adopting the Draft Mariana Trench Monument

Management Plan. PIRO and staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are finalizing the plan with a target release in 2024.

For the Pacific Remote Islands National Marine Monument (PRIMNM), NMFS collaborated with USFWS and the Udall Foundation to conduct a Renaming assessment to obtain input from Pacific Island communities about considering culturally appropriate names for the PRIMNM. NMFS will be co-hosting a formal engagement session at the Festival of the Pacific Arts and Culture to discuss naming conventions.

### **International Fisheries**

NMFS held a virtual public meeting of the Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to advise the U.S. Commissioners to the Commission for the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPFC) on May 13, 2024 from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm HST. The focus of the meeting was to review the WCPFC20 outcomes from the WCPFC Plenary meeting in December 2023 and discuss upcoming WCPFC subsidiary meeting topics, and to discuss U.S. priorities for the WCPFC Plenary meeting in December 2024.

NMFS attended the 16th Heads of Fisheries (HOF) meeting hosted by The Pacific Community (SPC), in Noumea, New Caledonia, from April 22 to 26, 2024. The SPC HOF meeting provides oversight of all SPC's work in the field of Pacific islands fisheries and aquaculture, and provides an opportunity to discuss relevant topics of regional interest. Key topics at HOF16 included, Climate change effects on Pacific ecosystems, fisheries, and aquaculture and the highlighted the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion flagship program.

### **Protected Resources**

In January 2024, NMFS published the [draft 2023 False Killer Whale Stock Assessment Report \(SAR\)](#) for public comment. The comment period for the draft SAR closed on April 24, 2024. NMFS fishery observers have recorded two interactions with false killer whales that occurred outside of the U.S. EEZ in the deep-set longline fishery in 2024.

On November 30, 2023, NMFS published a [new proposed rule to designate critical habitat](#) for five Western Pacific coral species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in American Sāmoa, Guam, CNMI, and the U.S. Pacific Remote Island Area (PRIA). NMFS held 6 in-person public hearings throughout the territories (two in American Sāmoa, four in Guam/CNMI) and one virtual public hearing to provide information on the new proposal and receive public comments. In total, these hearings were attended by ~245 people, and we received positive feedback for the revisions to the rule, incorporating the concerns of stakeholders, and expanding our outreach to outer islands. This proposed rule revises and replaces the original proposed rule that was published on November 27, 2020. During the six-month public comment period for the original proposed rule, the Council, territorial governments, and others provided substantial new information on the historical records of listed corals and their application to critical habitat. Subsequently, NMFS worked with the territorial governments, USFWS Refuges Program, and others to gather and review all records of listed

corals in and developed a new methodology for application of the records to the 2023 coral critical habitat proposed rule. The public comment period closed on February 28, 2024, and a final rule is due December 1, 2024.

In 2024, NMFS anticipates publishing a 12-month finding on a 2016 petition to list 10 species of giant clams as threatened or endangered under the ESA throughout their respective ranges. This follows a 90-day finding published in 2017 when NMFS announced that the petition presented substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted for 7 of the 10 species listed in the petition ([82 FR 28946](#)). On December 19, 2023, NMFS received a Notice of Intent to sue for failure to make a 12-month determination on the petition to list *Tridacninae* giant clams.

On April 2, 2023, the Hawai'i shallow-set longline fishery exceeded the incidental take statement (ITS) of 36 interactions with the endangered North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles specified in the 2019 biological opinion (BiOp). Exceeding an ITS is a trigger for reinitiation of consultation under ESA section 7. On October 27, 2023, PIRO Sustainable Fisheries Division (SFD) requested PIRO Protected Resources Division (PRD) reinitiate consultation to evaluate the effects of the Hawai'i shallow-set longline fishery on the North Pacific loggerhead sea turtle distinct population segment. To support this consultation, PIRO SFD, with input from PIFSC, the Council, and the Hawai'i Longline Association (HLA), prepared a biological evaluation that described the proposed action and potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the fishery on the population. On March 12, 2024 PRD delivered a supplemental no-jeopardy BiOp for North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles. The Council and HLA provided feedback on the draft and PRD incorporated that feedback into the final BiOp.

## **Sustainable Fisheries**

### *Key Updates*

As of May 15, 2024, NMFS Observer Program has successfully completed an end-to-end, or full cycle, test of the Onboard Record Collection Application (ORCA) at-sea. Eight observers deployed with tablets, and while they continued to collect data on paper, they also key-punched the data into their mobile tablet while at sea. The data from these tablets was successfully submitted through the application program interface, and ingested into the Pacific Islands Regional Observer Program System (PIROPS) version, and once approved, moved into the data warehouse. Next steps include reviewing the process of issuing tablets and debriefing observers to perfect the process for the next round of at-sea testing.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved the extension of OMB control no. 0648-0441 collection of information for Vessel Monitoring System Requirements for the Pacific Islands Fisheries. This collection authorizes the use of VMS for NMFS-monitored vessels. The new collection of information will expire on May 31, 2027.

On April 9, 2024, NMFS published a notice requesting comments on the extension of OMB 0648-0612 collection of information for the Western Pacific Community Development Program

Process. The Community Development Program promotes the participation of western Pacific communities in fisheries that they have traditionally depended upon, but may not have the capabilities to support continued and substantial participation in, possibly due to economic, regulatory or other barriers. Any western Pacific community interested in participating in the Community Development Program must develop and submit a community development plan to the Council and NMFS describing the activities, including fishing activities to be conducted under the plan. The information collected is used to determine whether the communities meet the regulatory requirements for participation in the program, and whether the activities are consistent with the intent of the program, the Magnuson-Stevens Act and other applicable laws. The collection includes no forms, although the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council provides instructions for preparing and submitting a community development plan. The 60-day public comment period expires on June 10, 2024.

NMFS staff continue to participate in national grant programs that support the management and sustainability of U.S. fisheries. During May 2024, NMFS staff participated in panel review of final proposals to the National Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP) annual federal funding opportunity in Juneau, AK. In 2024, BREP will provide 2.3 million in funding to support applied management projects and activities to reduce bycatch. BREP provides critical funds for investigating problems and developing solutions designed to minimize bycatch of fish and protected species and reduce bycatch mortality. There are five high-priority areas for the Fiscal Year 2024 including researching new technology; encouraging technology adoption; reducing post-release mortality; avoiding habitat interactions; and conducting international research. Awards are typically announced in August or September. More information on BREP, previously funded projects, and the annual funding opportunity can be found on the BREP [website](#).

### *Protected Species Workshops*

NMFS continues to provide required annual Protected Species Workshop (PSW) training to the longline fleet. NMFS offers an online PSW recertification training that may be taken two out of every three years, and a live PSW certification course every Friday morning. The live course is offered in-person only on the first Friday of each month and as a hybrid course, which can be attended virtually or in-person, on every following Friday.

- During 2023, NMFS held 48 live workshops (12 in-person only and 36 hybrid) and had 75 individuals register for the online PSW recertification training. These efforts led to 357 total certifications.
- So far during 2024, NMFS held 18 live workshops (5 in-person only and 13 hybrid) and had 34 individuals register for the online PSW recertification training. These efforts led to 133 total certifications.

NMFS has also started a new Protected Species Crew Training Program. Training longline crew in protected species safe handling and release is a mandatory requirement from the 2023 BiOp for the Hawai'i longline fisheries, which states that at least one crew member trained in protected species handling and release must be on deck during fishing operations at all times.

- The first two crew training sessions were held this year on April 19 and May 10, 2024, with Tagalog and Vietnamese interpreted workshops on both days. The initial effort on April 19 certified 26 crew members from 8 different vessels. The second training on May 10 certified 82 crew members from 19 different vessels. This has led to a total of 108 trained crew members from 27 vessels over the two training opportunities held this year.
- The Hawai'i Longline Association (HLA) has partnered with PIRO to contribute to the success of these events, including providing initial funds for language interpretation and t-shirts for participants. PIRO Protected Resources, NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, Hawai'i's Department of Transportation Harbor Police, and Council staff all provided extensive support for this effort.

For more information, fishermen may contact NMFS at [piropsw@noaa.gov](mailto:piropsw@noaa.gov) or (808) 725-5178, or visit the PIRO PSW [webpage](#). Lastly, for additional outreach to fishermen, an animated PSW handling and release [video](#) is available online. NMFS is also working to expand the scope and availability of translated materials to increase accessibility to fishery participants.

### *Engagement Events*

On April 23-25, 2024, PIRO and PIFSC co-hosted the annual meeting of NMFS Electronic Technologies Working Group (ETWG) to discuss the implementation of electronic monitoring, electronic reporting and other technologies in U.S. fisheries. The ETWG invited Council staff and representation from HLA to participate in an overview session of electronic monitoring (EM) programs in other regions. Council and HLA staff heard presentations from each of the regions and the Highly Migratory Species division and engaged in a discussion around key steps for EM pre-implementation. Lessons learned and connections made from meeting with the ETWG will benefit the PIR as we consider the future implementation of EM.

In April and May 2024, SFD staff represented PIRO at the eight Hawai'i Small-Boat Fisher's Forums on Oahu (2), Kauai (1), Molokai (1), Hawai'i Island (3), and Maui (1). The fishing community was encouraged to attend these meetings and have conversations with staff from PIRO, PIFSC, NMFS Office of Law Enforcement, State of Hawai'i (Department of Aquatic Resources, Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement (DOCARE)), Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG), Hawai'i Fishermen's Alliance for Conservation and Tradition (HFACT) and the Council regarding local issues.

On May 14, 2024, NMFS hosted a listening session on the Pacific Islands Region Aquaculture Program Planning. The listening session was a hybrid meeting, offering attendees access via their mobile device, or in person from any of six locations throughout Hawai'i and the Marianas. Outcomes from the session will be compiled with the other eight national and regional sessions held and will be shared as a list of priorities for the NMFS Aquaculture Program.

### *Permits*

NMFS continues to update information on fish catch limits, available on the PIRO [website](#).

All Pacific Islands region fishing permit applications and payments are processed electronically. Applications are submitted through the National Permit System (NPS) or through Kiteworks secure file transfer. Fee payments are processed in NPS or through the Department of Treasury’s [pay.gov](https://www.pay.gov) secure online payment system. PIRO’s permit website includes [instructions](#) for fishing permit applications and for 2024 Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) certificates. Applicants may contact NMFS for individual assistance at [piro-permits@noaa.gov](mailto:piro-permits@noaa.gov) or (808) 725-5190. Applicants may also visit the [website](#) for current fishing permit status. NMFS published a Federal Register notice (89 FR 35076) on May 1, 2024 soliciting applications for additional American Sāmoa Longline Limited Entry permits. NMFS could re-issue up to twenty small vessel class and sixteen large vessel class permits. Complete applications must be received by NMFS by August 29, 2024 to be considered..

Permits as of May 2024:

<b>Permit</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Pelagic</b>	
Hawai'i longline (limited entry)	149 active, 15 inactive/no-vessel (164 of 164)
American Sāmoa longline (limited entry)	24 active, 36 available (60 of 60)
Western Pacific general longline	-
Receiving vessel	2
Pelagic squid jig	-
Experimental fishing permit	1
<b>Hawai'i</b>	
Main Hawaiian Islands non-commercial bottomfish	-
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	1 (shrimp)
<b>American Sāmoa</b>	
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Mariana Islands</b>	
Guam large vessel bottomfish	-
Northern Mariana Islands bottomfish	1
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Pacific Remote Island Areas</b>	
Pelagic Troll & Handline	-
Bottomfish	-



<b>Permit</b>	<b>Number</b>
Special coral reef ecosystem	-
Precious Coral	-
Crustaceans	-
<b>Marine National Monument</b>	
Recreational Fishing	-
Recreational Charter	-