



Report of the Hawaii Small-boat Fisheries Meetings
April-May 2024

Prepared for the 152nd SSC and 199th Council Meeting

Background

Since its creation in 1976 under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the Council has made continuous efforts to monitor and understand the fisheries in the region in order to make sound management decisions. Although some data for Hawai‘i’s fisheries are available, other data (biological, economic, and social) are needed for informed management. The MSA requires management decisions to be based on the best available data. The pelagic small-boat fisheries (i.e., non-longline vessels) in Hawai‘i lack data needed for good management.

The performance of the pelagic small-boat fisheries and their impact on the stock are not clearly understood. Non-commercial vessel owners/fishermen are not required to record and report their catch, which results in a data gap. At its 180th meeting, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Council) in October 2019, the recommended that staff evaluate the effectiveness of the Council’s management measures for the Hawai‘i’s small-boat pelagic fisheries and to identify information gaps in the existing data collection programs that need to be addressed to support more effective management of these fisheries. In 2020, the Council initiated engagement with the fishing community to identify issues in the small-boat fisheries and collect ideas on filling information gaps. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these engagements were cut short.

After a protracted hiatus, the Council received funding from NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) in 2023 to reinitiate fishing community engagement meetings. The urgency to re-engage with the fishing communities in Hawaii and the region needed as there were notable declines in Commercial Marine License (CML) renewals. Additionally, many individuals strongly believed that regularly scheduled periodic engagement meetings between fishery scientists, managers, enforcement, infrastructure and support organizations with the fishing communities was necessary to improve then transparency in fishery rule/regulation. This focus toward a more inclusive and collaborative process in the development of sustainable fisheries management protocols for the generations that follow was key to improving the Best Scientific Information Available (BSIA) in the stock assessment process.

The Council contracted a coordinator to convene a working group of fishery scientists, managers, boating infrastructure, enforcement and representative organizations to re-engage with the fishing communities. The direction and focus were to limit the content of this initial engagement with the fishing communities to species that are jointly managed by the State of Hawaii and Federal fisheries agencies resulting in the formation of the Hawaii Small Boat Fisheries (non-longline) Working Group (SBWG).

Small-boat Working Group

The SBWG was set up to include each agency with responsibility for small-boat fisheries in Hawaii. The goal of the SBWG was to develop the agenda and plan for the engagement meetings and to commit to participating in the community meetings. SBWG members included representatives from the following groups:

- WPRFMC
- Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources
- NMFS PIFSC
- NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office
- Hawaii Advisory Panel
- NOAA Office of Law Enforcement
- Hawaii Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement (DOCARE)
- Pacific Islands Fisheries Group
- Hawaii Fishermen's Alliance for Conservation and Tradition

It is important to note that the Coordinator reached out to the Hawaii Division of Boating and Ocean Recreation (DOBOR) to participate in the SBWG and engagement meetings but there were issues regarding their participation. Regardless of active participation, DOBOR was included in the SBWG meeting emails and has responded to questions when asked. The inclusion and participation of DOBOR is an important piece of small-boat fisheries in Hawaii.

The SBWG developed an agenda for eight community engagement meetings and worked to secure commitments for participation of all members in the meetings. The group decided that the format for the meeting should mirror the Council's Fisher's Forum to provide informational booths, talks and leave room for discussion.

Community Engagement Meetings

Public meetings were held on Oahu, Kauai, Molokai, Hawaii, and Maui to engage the Hawaii small-boat fisheries community. These eight meetings followed the same format which included informational booths from each of the SBWG members as well as invited participants from Poseidon Fisheries Research, Hawaii Pacific University-Center for Marine Debris Research, Maui Co-Op Fishing Association, and University of Hawaii-Hawaii Cooperative Fisheries Research Unit. The community was able to interact with science and agency representatives and learn more about their activities as well as ask questions and get answers.

Following the open-house booth time of the meeting, Council staff provided an icebreaker activity using the Kahoot! platform to ask questions about small-boat fisheries. It also included a word cloud feature that gathered information on what word comes to mind when they think about fishing. The answer that came up the most was "food" across nearly every meeting, noting the importance of fishing to feed the community. This activity allowed for participants to interact and be a part of the discussion rather than a lecture format.

Presentations on the Council and State of Hawaii DAR were provided to give participants an idea of what was being asked of the community and what each agency does. How the Council and DAR works provided a basis of understanding for the community. It also gave participants an idea of why they were being engaged and helped to direct the conversation. The arrangement of the room in a “meeting-in-the-round” where everyone sat facing each other as a part of the conversation provided for good discussion.

Discussions

Each meeting had different discussions and focused on different main points. However, there were some main points that participants agreed on. The first is that in order to build trust, there needs to be a relationship between the scientists/agency and the fishing community. This can be formed by continued engagement and providing information back to the community. It was noted that fishers often provide information but don’t know how it is being used. To that point, the community said they were willing to provide information but there needed to be an incentive. Participants differed in what those incentives should be but all agreed that in order to get something there needs to be some kind of benefit. The need to re-engage the small boat community showed that the absence of consistent outreach and engagement of fishing communities created gaps in fisher understanding of the evolving fishery management like the shift to the “ECOSYSTEM-BASED” regime expanding the management considerations needing to be addressed instead of simply managing fishers. The following is a brief summary of some of the points made at each meeting.

On Oahu, there were meetings held in Kaneohe and in Honolulu with a total of over 30 participants. There were discussions in Kaneohe about the difference between Federal and State management, particularly in the federal requirement of using Best Scientific Information Available. Discussion centered on the use of BSIA or culture and the need for a balance. There were also discussion on the lack of information, particularly on imported seafood and non-commercial fishing. Participants perceived that the more data provided, the more is taken away from them, showing the need to build trust for data use.

The second meeting on Kauai included over two dozen participants and access issues were a main concern. Being able to fish in safe, open areas that was free of protected species closures, privatization of access points, tourists, and homeless is rare. Participants said that each of these issues is a problem but cumulatively it is an even larger problem. They said there needs to be a balance and that in order for them to provide information like data, there should be something in return, such as relief from some of those problems. There were additional concerns about protected species where they wanted a cultural take of green sea turtles and were convinced that monk seals were being brought to the island. They also said that more people have been fishing since COVID having an impact on crowded fishing spots as well as market prices.

The meeting on Molokai had fewer participants with just over a dozen but had focused discussions. A big issue for their community is that the Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs) do not last long and could be in the wrong place. The depths and location of the FADs were not in locations that would aggregate fish and there are none on the Maui-facing side of the island. Costs are high and impacts fishing and the community noted that convenience like jet skis are

not good for the resources. One main theme from Molokai was that the island always gets the leftovers or second-best resources from the state and they would like to see that changed.

There were three meetings held on Hawaii Island, one in Hilo, one in Waimea, and one in Kona with a total of over 50 participants. With the meeting locations, most of the island was covered, particularly the larger boat-fishing ports and communities. Participants noted the relevance of addressing ecosystem elements associated with the fisheries including habitat. The non-fishing impacts play a larger role in the ecosystem and the fish stocks and should be looked at and provided to the community. Participants said that scientists need to better understand how the fishery is conducted to improve the science used to estimate stock status. The community also noted that there were infrastructure issues and that there is fish, just no fishermen because they cannot access the fish. Some participants noted that the culture of fishing was disassociated from management and those real issues and their causes are ignored.

The last meeting on Maui had about 20 participants and discussion focused on how fishermen benefit from the data. Participants noted the need for incentives and a give back to the community in exchange for data. They also said that scientists need to observe the conduct of the fishery to better understand what the quantitative data reflects as related to the fishery. There is also a need to validate the numbers to see if it reflects how the fishery actually operates. A big issue was the decline in full-time fisheries and the loss of cultural and traditional values in the fisheries. Participants said that the fleet is aging and there was a need for younger generations to get involved in the fishery.

Follow-up and Next Steps

As part of the meetings, Council staff set up a google form to capture feedback on the small-boat fisheries. There were over 100 responses to the survey that was provided as a QR code that linked to an online survey asking fishers to self-identify the type of fishing they do, if they report their catch, what the issues are, and what is the best way to keep in touch with the community, amongst other questions. About 80% of the respondents said they fish from a boat but only about half of them either reported their catch for a commercial marine license or kept personal logs. More than a third does not keep records of their catch. The top issues reported were fishing infrastructure, laws and regulations, cost of fishing, and access. When asked how the Council could continue to communicate with the community, most said email was the best way with phone or text message also important. Interestingly, Instagram was noted as the social media of choice.

Overall, attendance was fair and the community assessment of the meetings showed that it satisfied the overall engagement expectations of the small-boat fishing community. Participants cited the lack of effective communication and notification about the meetings but those who attended did note that they saw the notice on TV, the newspaper, and even social media. Every tackle shop that was visited on the neighbor islands also had the meeting flyer or was posted on community bulletin boards. There may be a need for an increased social media presence and that the information needs to get to the “influencers” in order for it to get out to a larger audience. The venues were good but there may be a need for additional venues in other parts of the islands.

The Council plans to continue the engagement with the small-boat fisheries, particularly in light of the needs of the Inflation Reduction Act proposal projects. Issues for the community will continue to include non-commercial data collection, but the initial meetings identified specific issues such as protected species on Kauai and infrastructure on Hawaii Island may require tailored agendas for future meetings. The initial relationships were set during this meetings which the Council and the other agencies hope to translate into trust as future meetings and initiatives are started within the community.