

NOAA Fisheries Service

National Marine Fisheries Service
Pacific Islands Region



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NOAA FISHERIES RELEASES BIOLOGICAL OPINION

NOAA Fisheries Service released a Biological Opinion on the continuation of the Hawaii-based pelagic, deep-set longline fishery which targets tuna in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone around the U.S. Pacific Islands and waters of the western and central Pacific Ocean.

Consultation under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was re-initiated on February 17, 2005, for the fishery because the incidental take of olive ridley sea turtles exceeded levels specified in the Incidental Take Statement of the February 23, 2004, Biological Opinion. The new biological opinion considers effects of the fishery on four species of listed sea turtles (olive ridley, green, leatherback, and loggerhead turtles) and on endangered humpback whales. The biological opinion concludes that the fishery is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the four sea turtle species or humpback whales.

“Deep-set longline fishery interactions with listed marine mammals are extremely rare. Interactions with sea turtles are more common and generally result in injury and sometimes these interactions are fatal. But, the evaluation of the fishery impacts on the species concluded that the fishery would not likely jeopardize these species,” said Bill Robinson, the Regional Administrator for the Pacific Islands Regional Office of NOAA Fisheries Service.

Sea turtles are present year-round in the pelagic, oceanic waters where the deep-set longline fishery occurs. Many of the sea turtles that interact with the fishery originate from distant nesting beaches in the Pacific Ocean such as Mexico, Ecuador, Japan, and Indonesia. Green turtles originating from nesting beaches at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are also known to interact with the fishery. NOAA Fisheries Service relies on genetic signals from tissue samples collected in the fishery to determine the nesting beach origin of the turtles. The genetic information is a key piece for NOAA Fisheries Service to assess the impact of the fishery on the various sea turtle nesting aggregations in the Pacific Ocean.

To minimize the effects of the fishery and protect listed species, NOAA Fisheries Service has provided a number of conservation recommendations in its biological opinion. These recommendations are in addition to numerous ongoing activities implemented by NOAA Fisheries Service and the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council where research to reduce sea turtle bycatch in pelagic and coastal fisheries and programs to protect sea turtle nesting beaches are yielding encouraging results.

“There has been a sharp decline in the number of sea turtle interactions in the Hawaii-based longline fishery since the late 1990s. We continue to research and implement measures to reduce sea turtle bycatch in U.S. fisheries and to share these breakthroughs with foreign fleets with historically high levels of sea turtle bycatch,” said Robinson.

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The Endangered Species Act of 1973 requires all federal agencies to further the purposes of the Act by carrying out programs for the conservation of threatened and endangered species. Any project authorized, funded, or carried out by the federal government must ensure that their action does not jeopardize the continued existence of threatened and endangered species, or destroy or adversely modify the conservation value of their critical habitat.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries in the Pacific Islands, please visit our website at <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/pir/>.

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