



Public Comment

P.O. Box 31
500 St. Mark's Lane
Islip, NY 11751
Phone: 631-224-9820
Fax: 631-581-7558



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 6, 2001

Contacts: Carrie Collins (202) 537-9166
Amy Bunch (301) 593-2870
David Wilmot (516) 885-9319

Conservationists Call for Strong Standards to Protect Pacific Fish Populations



Ocean Wildlife Campaign Urges Fishery Council To Adopt Sweeping Regulatory Actions



Portland, OR – The Ocean Wildlife Campaign (OWC), a coalition of six national conservation organizations, today issued comprehensive recommendations to prevent overfishing and reduce incidental catch of large, oceanic fish in the US Pacific. The recommendations, which affect highly migratory species (HMS) -- tunas, swordfish, marlins, and oceanic sharks -- in the waters off California, Washington and Oregon, will be presented at the Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting this week in Portland, Oregon.



“Unless we act now, highly migratory Pacific fish may be in danger of decline because of overfishing and indiscriminate, non-selective fishing practices that are common in West Coast waters,” said David Wilmot, Ph.D., Director of the Ocean Wildlife Campaign. “We want to avoid the devastation done to Atlantic HMS populations, so we are urging Pacific fishery managers to act now to protect ocean health as well as the economic health of the fishing industries.”



Under U.S. law, fishery management plans (FMPs) are developed by regional councils and administered by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Currently, there is no comprehensive federal plan for Pacific HMS caught off the US West Coast. FMPs for Atlantic swordfish, sharks, tunas, and marlin were enacted in the 1990s, but several of these populations will require decades to recover from overfishing.



“We applaud the Pacific Council for recognizing the need to protect these important fish. We urge the Council to move quickly and avoid additional delays in finalizing a strong plan,” added Russell Dunn, Assistant Director of the OWC.

(more)

The Pacific Council meets this week, with participation from representatives from industry and conservation groups, to finalize its draft FMP for HMS off California, Washington and Oregon. The Council is scheduled to release the draft FMP for public comment in April 2001.

The OWC is highlighting the Council's legal mandate to minimize incidental catch or "bycatch" in HMS fisheries. Bycatch includes fish and other marine life taken along with the desired catch as a result of indiscriminate fishing methods and gear. Bycatch can lead to a variety of environmental problems, including overfishing and disruption of marine ecosystem health and biodiversity.

"We are calling on the Pacific Council to establish strong conservation measures to address existing problems, such as bycatch of whales, turtles and unwanted fish in the drift gillnet fishery. The Council must also prevent others gears with well documented bycatch problems, such as drift longlines, from expanding into new areas. The burden of proof must shift; industry must prove that they can clean up their act," remarked Dr. Wilmot. "In other words, show me the bycatch reduction."

To safeguard Pacific Highly Migratory Species, the Ocean Wildlife Campaign is calling for:

1. **Minimization of bycatch.** The FMP should establish a bycatch reduction plan with specific targets and milestones as well as performance standards for all gears;
2. **A moratorium on all new fishing gears** (including gears that would be new to a geographic area such as pelagic longlines). New gears may be allowed in the future, but only if the fishing industry demonstrates that the gear meets conservation standards; and
3. **Precautionary catch limits to prevent overfishing.** Catch quotas with a "margin of safety" are needed now to guard against depletion while scientists develop population assessments and address data gaps and uncertainties.

(For more information on OWC recommendations, see WWW.AUDUBON.ORG/CAMPAIGN/LO/OW.)

The Ocean Wildlife Campaign is a coalition of the Center for Marine Conservation, National Audubon Society, National Coalition for Marine Conservation, Natural Resources Defense Council, Wildlife Conservation Society, and World Wildlife Fund. The OWC was created to tackle the complex challenge of conserving and restoring giant ocean fishes, including sharks, swordfish, marlin, and tunas. The OWC is generously supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

###