

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON HIGH SEAS LIMITED ENTRY LONGLINE FISHERY

The Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) discussed a possible management framework for a West Coast-based high seas shallow-set longline fishery with members of the Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) during the joint HMSMT/HMSAS meeting in La Jolla on August 14-15, 2007. The HMSMT solicited comments from industry representatives who were present at the meeting regarding their possible interest in moving forward with measures to establish a high seas shallow-set longline fishery under the Fishery Management Plan for U.S. West Coast Fisheries for Highly Migratory Species (HMS FMP).

A white paper summarizing a chronology of events leading up to the current state of affairs and compiling previous HMSMT work on this subject was presented to the joint bodies (Agenda Item F.2.a, Attachment 1). The paper proposed a number of alternatives, including a status quo option along with various possible configurations of a West Coast-based high seas shallow set longline (SSLL) fishery. Industry representatives in attendance suggested a small and tightly controlled West Coast-based SSLL fishery could involve a limited number of vessels, for example ten, based on a qualifying point system similar to one that was established to identify eligible fishers in Alaska's limited entry fisheries. The fishery could operate under a similar set of conservation measures as those used in the Hawaii SSLL fishery to reduce the risk of interactions with protected species, including ESA listed sea turtles and seabirds.

Meeting participants discussed the possible role of combined Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (WPFMC) and Pacific Council management of the pelagic fisheries. A longline fishing industry member in attendance, with experience in fishing under the WPFMC's Pelagics FMP, pointed out that it is not in WPFMC's interest to coordinate management with the Pacific Council. He opined that engaging in joint management would potentially place WPFMC-managed commercial fisheries at risk of curtailment of effort along the lines of conservation measures which currently constrain pelagic longline and drift-gillnet fishing effort in the West Coast EEZ.

The HMSMT wishes to call to the Council's attention that a Notice of Intent was published in the Federal Register on August 21, 2007, by the WPFMC and NMFS Pacific Islands Region Office (PIRO) for the preparation of a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for consideration of federal management of the Hawaii SSLL fishery. (Agenda Item F.2.a, Attachment 2). (As noted in the situation summary, written scoping comments on the SEIS must be received by September 20, 2007.) The SEIS will analyze, among other options, the possibility of removing the overall effort limit and increasing the allowable number of turtle interactions which currently constrains Hawaii-based SSLL fishing effort. Given that the populations of leatherback and loggerhead turtles, which are potentially impacted by the Hawaii-based SSLL fishery, would also be potentially impacted by a future West Coast-based SSLL fishery, any increase in allowable turtle take that would result from this proposed action could indirectly impose stringent conservation limits on any potential expansion of a West Coast-based SSLL fishery. The HMSMT recommends that the Council request from both the WPFMC and

NMFS PIRO that future considerations into increasing fishing effort and allowable turtle interactions take into consideration a West Coast-based SSSL fishery. The HMSMT has been informed that the NMFS Southwest Region Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries has undertaken preliminary discussions with his counterpart at NMFS PIRO on the feasibility of a joint SEIS approach for a Pacific-wide SSSL fishery framework recognizing fleets and interests for both Council-managed HMS fisheries. The HMSMT supports these discussions and requests that a timely decision is made to address, among other things, the issue of the first-come first-serve framework that currently exists in regards to the available turtle interaction caps.

Provided there is sufficient interest by West Coast-based vessels, the HMSMT requests guidance from the Council in setting its future work plan to develop the necessary criteria to establish a West Coast-based SSSL fishery. These criteria include, but are not limited to, the development of limited entry and/or effort controls, HMS FMP regulatory measures to ensure compliance with all applicable state and federal statutes, and the implementation of best conservation practices that have been recently developed. The HMSMT notes that the start of the SEIS scoping process by WPFMC and NMFS PIRO underscores the urgency for taking prompt action on this issue.

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