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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration****50 CFR Part 665**

[Docket No. 170120106-7999-01]

RIN 0648-XF186

Pacific Island Fisheries; 2017 Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Department of Commerce.

ACTION: Proposed specifications; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS proposes annual catch limits (ACLs) for Pacific Island crustacean, precious coral, and territorial bottomfish fisheries, and accountability measures (AMs) to correct or mitigate any overages of catch limits. The proposed ACLs and AMs would be effective for fishing year 2017. The proposed ACLs and AMs support the long-term sustainability of fishery resources of the U.S. Pacific Islands.

DATES: NMFS must receive comments by November 14, 2017.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments on this document, identified by NOAA-NMFS-2017-0012, by either of the following methods:

- *Electronic Submission:* Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to <http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=NOAA-NMFS-2017-0012>, click the "Comment Now!" icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.

- *Mail:* Send written comments to Michael D. Tosatto, Regional Administrator, NMFS Pacific Islands Region (PIR), 1845 Wasp Blvd., Bldg. 176, Honolulu, HI 96818.

Instructions: NMFS may not consider comments sent by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment period. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted for public viewing on www.regulations.gov without change. All personal identifying information (e.g., name, address, etc.), confidential business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly accessible.

NMFS prepared environmental analyses that describe the potential impacts on the human environment that would result from the proposed ACLs and AMs. Copies of the environmental analyses and other supporting documents are available at www.regulations.gov.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Sarah Ellgen, NMFS PIR Sustainable Fisheries, 808-725-5173.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Fisheries in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ, or Federal waters) around the U.S. Pacific Islands are managed under archipelagic fishery ecosystem plans (FEPs) for American Samoa, Hawaii, the Pacific Remote Islands, and the Mariana Archipelago (Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)). A fifth FEP covers pelagic fisheries. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) developed the FEPs, and NMFS implemented them under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

Each FEP contains a process for the Council and NMFS to specify ACLs and AMs; that process is codified at Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations, Section 665.4 (50 CFR 665.4). The regulations require NMFS to specify, every fishing year, an ACL for each stock and stock complex of management unit species (MUS) in an FEP, as recommended by the Council and considering the best available scientific, commercial, and other information about the fishery. If a fishery exceeds an ACL, the regulations require the Council to take action, which may include reducing the ACL for the subsequent fishing year by the amount of the overage, or other appropriate action.

NMFS proposes to specify ACLs for the crustacean and precious corals MUS in American Samoa, Guam, the CNMI, and Hawaii, and the bottomfish MUS in American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI for fishing year 2017. The fishing year for each fishery began on January 1 and ends on December 31, except for precious coral fisheries, which began July 1 and ends on June 30 next year.

In this action, NMFS is not proposing to specify 2017 ACLs for Hawaii Kona crab and non-Deep 7 bottomfish, or coral reef ecosystem MUS in all island areas. This is because NMFS has new information for those MUS that may require additional environmental analyses to support the Council's recommendations. NMFS would propose those ACL specifications in a separate action(s). In addition, NMFS specified the 2017-2018 ACL and AM

for Hawaii Deep 7 bottomfish in June 2017 (82 FR 29778, June 30, 2017).

NMFS based the proposed specifications for crustacean, precious coral, and territorial bottomfish MUS on recommendations from the Council at its 164th meeting held October 21-22, 2015, its 166th meeting held June 6-10, 2016, and its 170th meeting held June 19-22, 2017. For this action, the Council recommended 36 ACLs: Seven each in American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI, and 15 in Hawaii. The Council also recommended that NMFS specify multi-year ACLs and AMs in fishing years 2015-2018. NMFS proposes to implement the specifications for each year separately, prior to each fishing year. NMFS previously implemented the 2016 specifications for bottomfish, crustacean, precious coral, and coral reef ecosystem MUS (82 FR 18716, April 21, 2017). All of the proposed 2017 ACLs in this action would be the same as those specified in 2016 (82 FR 18716, April 21, 2017). NMFS also proposes to specify the same AMs as it did in 2016.

Data from these fisheries for fishing year 2016 indicate that catches from each fishery in 2016 did not exceed the fishery's ACL, with the exception of the CNMI slipper lobsters. NMFS proposes to specify an ACL of 60 lb for CNMI slipper lobsters, which is the same ACL that NMFS implemented in 2016, even though the average three-year catch for this fishery exceeded the ACL. For CNMI slipper lobsters, there is no OFL or maximum sustainable yield (MSY) estimate. Prior to 2016, there were only three years (2007-2009) of available catch information for slipper lobsters in the CNMI. Therefore, in 2014, at its 116th meeting, the SSC recommended a proxy for calculating the ACL for the CNMI slipper lobster stock complex. Using a catch-to-habitat-based proxy comparing data from the Hawaii slipper lobster fishery (the only area that has specifically documented harvesting of slipper lobster), the Council recommended setting an ACL for the CNMI slipper lobsters for 2016-2018 at a level equal to ABC, that is, 60 lb.

In 2015, NOAA started a pilot program to improve commercial vendor reporting in the CNMI. The Territory Science Initiative was designed to improve the data vendors submit to commercial receipt books, which track, among other stocks, the slipper lobster fishery. NMFS staff trained vendors to complete receipt books and incorporate the process into their day-to-day business routines. The program proved to be effective, and in 2016, the CNMI commercial receipt book program documented 304 lb of slipper lobsters sold by local fishermen. In comparison,