

MANAGEMENT OF HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES IN THE PACIFIC

Prepared for the Council Chairs' Meeting, July 1995

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Situation: The issue is how the fishery management councils in the Pacific area and the Secretary of Commerce should manage highly migratory species in the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Pacific Ocean. The Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act gives plan development responsibility to the councils in the Pacific area, whereas the Secretary has this responsibility for the Atlantic and Caribbean. The Western Pacific Council developed the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Pelagic Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region which was implemented in 1987. The domestic longline fishery based in Hawaii is under federal regulations that include limited entry, logbook reporting, onboard observers, area closures and a vessel monitoring system. The FMP prohibits gillnet gear.

The Pacific and North Pacific Councils have not developed plans for these species. In the Pacific Council area, no conservation or management issues have surfaced requiring development of a federal plan and regulations. The State of California regulates a significant fishery for swordfish. The state allows gillnet gear but prohibits longlines (the reverse of the situation in Hawaii). A few swordfish longline vessels fish outside of 200 miles and land in California. In response to concerns about the need for coordinated data collection throughout the range of the stocks, these vessels are now required to submit logbooks.

The Western Pacific Council is proposing that it be designated as the council in charge of managing these species throughout the Pacific EEZ. The Western Pacific Council prepared a paper describing its proposal. The paper concludes that designation of the Western Pacific Council as the single council is the most efficient option. Other options include status quo, coordinated data collection only, joint FMP preparation, and Secretarial management.

This proposal was reviewed by the Pacific Council at the March 1994 and October 1994 meetings. West Coast constituents are unanimously opposed to the Western Pacific proposal. They are concerned that West Coast interests would not be protected by Western Pacific Council decisions. Testimony was submitted by California Seafood Council, Western Fishboat Owners' Association, Pacific Offshore Fishermen's Association, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Blue Water Fishermen's Association, Fishermen's Cooperative Association of San Pedro, California Gillnetters' Association, Fishermen's Union of America, Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, and a number of individual fishers.

The Pacific Council is not convinced of the need to alter current management arrangements at this time. The principal concern appears to be the need for coordinated and comprehensive data collection throughout the range of these highly migratory fish. Therefore, at the October 1994 meeting, the Pacific Council recommended that existing data be compiled, data needs be identified, and recommendations be made on how to fill information gaps. The Pacific Council requested that a decision on this issue be deferred until after the data report has been prepared and reviewed by the affected entities.

In December 1994, the Western Pacific Council wrote Secretary Brown and requested that he designate the Western Pacific Council as the single council responsible for developing a comprehensive plan. Assistant Administrator Schmitten responded that he would defer a decision until after the data report is available.

The Southwest Fisheries Science Center of the National Marine Fisheries Service took on the task of developing the requested data report. The report was completed in March 1995 and distributed to the councils. The Status Report on Pacific Pelagic Fisheries Data describes data requirements, data collection activities, data availability and additional data needs. One of the major concerns was lack of logbook data from swordfish longliners fishing outside the EEZ and landing in California. The State of California now requires logbook data from these fishers, and there are presently only four longliners operating in this fishery. Remaining significant data needs identified in the report include catch and effort data from Japanese longliners since 1980, reliable domestic recreational data, shark discard data, and catch-effort data for Hawaii troll and handline fisheries for tuna and marlin.

Next Step: The Pacific and Western Pacific Councils are scheduled to address the data report at their respective August meetings. The councils and the Secretary need to consider whether the data gaps require that a Pacific-wide management plan be developed, or if there are conservation or management problems which make the plan necessary. If a plan is necessary, the Secretary will have to decide between single-council designation or a jointly prepared plan.

PFMC
6/12/95