

Dated: July 12, 1999.

Marshall P. Jones,

Acting Director, Fish and Wildlife Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 660

[I.D. 080499B]

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Proposed Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan of the Western Pacific Region (Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP); EIS for the FMP for the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region; (Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish Fisheries FMP)

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

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare EISs; request for comments; notice of scoping meeting.

SUMMARY: NOAA announces its intention to prepare an EIS in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 for the proposed Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP, and an EIS for the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish Fisheries FMP. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) will hold a public scoping hearing in American Samoa on management alternatives to be analyzed under both EISs.

DATES: Written comments on the intent to prepare the EISs will be accepted on or before August 26, 1999. A public scoping meeting is scheduled for August 19, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Written comments on the intent to prepare the EISs or other aspects of the scoping documents, which contain suggested alternatives and potential impacts should be sent to and copies of the scoping documents are available from Kitty M. Simonds, Executive Director, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, 1164 Bishop St., Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813, and to Charles Karnella, Administrator, National Marine Fisheries Service, Pacific Islands Area Office, 1601 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 1110, Honolulu HI 96814.

The following location and time have been set for the scoping meeting:

American Samoa, August 19, 1999, 3-5 p.m., Conference Room, Division of Marine and Wildlife Resources, Pago Pago, AS. Phone contact 684-633-4456 for information. Subsequent public scoping meetings are tentatively planned for Hawaii (details regarding times and locations will follow in a separate **Federal Register** announcement).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Kitty M. Simonds, at 808-522-8220.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: A summary of the Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP will be presented including initial recommendations for management action, as described here. Comments will be solicited from the public on these and any other management alternatives the public cares to offer.

Management measures that might be adopted in the Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP include permit and reporting requirements for non-subsistence harvest of coral reef resources, marine protected areas to ensure greater conservation and management to special locations, allowable gear types to harvest coral reef resources in the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ), prohibition on use of gear in ways destructive to habitat, and a framework management process to add future new measures. The FMP would also include essential fish habitat and habitat areas of particular concern, including fishing and non-fishing threats, as well as other components of FMPs required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). An additional measure, still under consideration for possible inclusion, is a ban on the possession or collection, for commercial purposes, of wild "live rock" and coral (other than coral covered by the Fishery Management Plan for the Precious Corals Fisheries of the Western Pacific Region). The collection of live rock or coral for scientific and research purposes and the collection of small amounts of live coral as brood-stock for captive breeding/aquaculture would be allowed by permit.

The Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP, and its associated EIS, would be the Council's fifth FMP for the EEZ for all U.S. Pacific Islands. This area includes nearly 11,000 km² (4,000 square miles) of coral reefs. Development of the Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP is timely, considering such new mandates and initiatives as the April 1999 report to Congress by the Ecosystem Principles Advisory Panel on Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management, the President's 1998 Executive Order on Coral Reefs (E.O. 13089), and priorities of the U.S.

Coral Reef Task Force and the U.S. Coral Reef Initiative, as well as the provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, as amended by the Sustainable Fisheries Act. The draft Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP would describe the importance of coral reef resources to the region and current and potential threats that warrant an FMP at this time.

Information regarding the harvest of these resources in the EEZ is largely unknown. Potential for unregulated harvest and bio-prospecting for reef fish, live grouper, live rock and coral exists throughout the region. Marine debris, largely from fishing gear, is adversely impacting reefs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

The public is also invited to assist the Council in developing the scope of alternatives and impacts that should be analyzed in an EIS for the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish Fisheries FMP. An EIS has not been prepared for the FMP. Since the FMP was implemented in 1986, many changes have occurred in this fishery, and with the stocks and management regimes. As part of the scoping process for the EIS for this FMP, the public is also invited to comment on an alternative being considered for the addition of bottomfish species, in the EEZ around the U.S. Pacific Island possessions (and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)), to the management unit of the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish FMP. Federal regulations for the EEZ off the U.S. Island possessions (and the CNMI) that would provide basic protection and conservation measures are already established in the EEZs for other parts of the Western Pacific Region, and include no taking with explosives, poisons, trawl nets or bottom-set gillnets. A definition of overfishing for a list of identified FMP management unit species would be established and evaluated annually, with required action in the event of overfishing.

Public Information Meetings

Additional public information meetings and public hearings on the proposed EISs may be held in Hawaii later in the year. These meetings will be advertised in the **Federal Register** and the local newspapers.

Special Accommodations

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Kitty M. Simonds, (see **ADDRESSES**), 808-522-8220 (voice) or 808-522-8226 (fax), at least 5 days prior to the meeting date.

Dated: August 10, 1999.

Bruce C. Morehead,

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable
Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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