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Council supports commercial fishing in Northwestern monument

By [Jan TenBruggencate](#)
Advertiser Science Writer

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council hopes commercial fishing becomes a permanent feature of the new Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument, but the idea has not developed much traction with other agencies or with Hawai'i's congressional delegation.

President Bush's designation of the monument calls for current fishing licenses to expire after five years. And the only concession to the eight boats now fishing the remote waters along the northern part of Hawai'i's archipelago is that they may receive a buyout offer — either from the federal government or a private trust.

Both U.S. Sens. Daniel K. Inouye and Daniel K. Akaka cited concerns about the protection of fishing interests when the monument was announced June 15. But their staffs say they have not pushed to keep commercial fishing beyond the five-year window contained in the monument announcement.

"Sen. Inouye's primary concern is that the new Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument receives adequate funding," and that fishing interests are properly compensated for the requirement that they stop fishing there, said Mike Yuen, Inouye's press secretary.

In a statement when the monument was announced, Akaka urged the administration to "properly incorporate the cultural traditions that are of great importance to Native Hawaiians and careful traditions of fishermen."

Akaka at the time asked the Senate subcommittee on national parks, of which he is the ranking member, to hold a hearing to "ensure that the unique cultural and natural resources are preserved."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Sanctuaries program was designated the lead agency in the management of the monument and is working on getting the monument up and running, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state of Hawai'i. Calls on the subject of extending fishing were referred by the local NOAA monument office to NOAA Washington, D.C.-based public affairs officer Ben Sherman.

"We're proceeding with the implementation of the regulations as drafted," Sherman said. He was aware of no active effort to make commercial fishing a permanent part of the monument management system, he said.

But anglers continue to hope for a change. Bottomfishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands provides roughly one-third of the state's supply of snappers like 'opakapaka and onaga. The remaining two-thirds are split between catch in the main Hawaiian Islands and imports.

Council executive director Kitty Simonds said her panel has two goals: to see that fishing interests are appropriately compensated in the short term, but also to argue for continued fishing in those waters.

Reach Jan TenBruggencate at jant@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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