

NOAA Rejects Fishing in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

HONOLULU, Hawaii, October 26, 2005 (ENS) - In the midst of a public process to designate the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as the nation's 14th marine sanctuary, NOAA has rejected a fisheries proposal for the 1,200 mile long island chain from the Western Pacific Fisheries Management Council (WESPAC).

NOAA Administrator Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher told conservation advocates on a videoconference call Tuesday that he had just signed and delivered a letter to WESPAC informing them that NOAA rejected their proposed fishery plan for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as "incompatible with proposed sanctuary goals and objectives."

Stephanie Fried, an Environmental Defense senior scientist based on Oahu, called Lautenbacher's decision, "a significant and very welcome breakthrough."

WESPAC's draft fishing regulations for the proposed Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Marine Sanctuary would allow bottomfish and deepwater fisheries to continue under existing federal regulations.

Under existing federal regulations up to 17 bottomfish vessels of under 60 feet length are permitted to fish in the far-flung archipelago. Nine bottomfish vessels are currently active. They provide about one-third of Hawaii's commercial landings of opakapaka, onaga and other snappers, groupers and jacks from what WESPAC calls "healthy stocks fished well below biologically safe levels of harvest."

But on Tuesday's videoconference call, Native Hawaiian fishers and cultural practitioners and local environmentalists presented experiences from around the islands and a detailed accounting of the public sentiment throughout the islands regarding the need for strong protections, no commercial or recreational fishing, limited access, and recognition of traditional



A diver explores French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

(Photo courtesy [NOAA](#))

cultural Native Hawaiian practices.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are currently considered a Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve by Executive Order of President Bill Clinton. The Order specifically directed the Secretary of Commerce to initiate the process to designate the reserve as a national marine sanctuary.

NOAA is currently formulating a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on the sanctuary designation that will be released later this year or early next year for public comment.

Fried said environmentalists now want to ensure that the proposed sanctuary DEIS "promotes a preferred alternative in line with the wishes of the people of Hawaii, expressed during 30 hearings, more than 100 meetings over the past five years."

Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle, a Republican, signed regulations September 29 creating a marine refuge in the three miles of state waters surrounding each small island and atoll in the remote island chain.

At the same time, Lingle announced a shift in state government policy to request and support a ban on commercial and recreational fishing in federal waters of the proposed sanctuary.

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