

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

## National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

## 50 CFR Part 660

[I.D. 071299A]

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

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

**ACTION:** Notice of intent to prepare EISs; request for comments.

**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 public scoping hearings in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands (Saipan) on management alternatives to be analyzed under both EISs.

**DATES:** Written comments on the intent to prepare the two EISs will be accepted on or before July 29, 1999. Public scoping meetings are scheduled for July 28 and 29, 1999.

**ADDRESSES:** Written comments on suggested alternatives and potential impacts should be sent to Kitty M. Simonds, Executive Director, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, 1164 Bishop St., Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813, and to Charles Karnella, Administrator, NMFS, Pacific Islands Area Office, 1601 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 1110, Honolulu HI 96814.

The following locations and times have been set for scoping meetings:

1. Guam, scoping meeting/public hearing, July 28, 1999, 6 - 8 p.m., Asan Community Center, Asan Village, GU. Phone contact c/o Guam Dept. of Commerce, 671-475-0321.
2. Saipan, scoping meeting/public hearing, July 29, 1999, 6 - 9 p.m., Carolinian Utt Pavilion (across from Bank of Guam and Ocean View Hotel), Garapan, Saipan CNMI, Phone Division of Fish and Wildlife Resources, 670-322-9627 for information.
3. Additional field hearings for public scoping are tentatively planned for

August in American Samoa and 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. It 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 km<sup>2</sup> (4,000 square miles) of coral reefs. Development of the 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, including provisions of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. The draft Coral Reef Ecosystem FMP describes the importance of coral reef resources to the

region and current and potential threats that warrant a management plan 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 impacting reefs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

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

**Public Information Meetings**

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

**Special Accommodations**

These meetings are 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 five days prior to the meeting date.

Dated: July 16, 1999.

**Bruce C. Morehead,**

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

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