
Press Release - Council Advances Sea Turtle Actions, Finalizes Fishing Recommendations

From Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council <info-wpcouncil.org@shared1.ccsend.com>

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Press Release

For Immediate Release

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*Green sea turtle heading back to sea in the CNMI.
Photo: Jack Ogumoro.*

HONOLULU (18 September 2026) The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council yesterday called on federal agencies to move forward with long-awaited green sea turtle status reviews in Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and American Samoa — an important step in addressing Pacific Island requests for the restoration of traditional cultural harvest.

“Populations of green sea turtles in the territories are listed as

endangered under the ESA,” said CNMI Council member Sylvan Igisomar. “However, an international body of sea turtle experts [IUCN] has determined that they are of least concern — essentially saying they are no longer threatened. We’re looking forward to working with this Administration to address our requests.”

The Council requested the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expedite reviews of the green sea turtle distinct population segments associated with the three U.S. Pacific territories. NMFS Regional Administrator Sarah Malloy said a status review is needed to determine whether a population meets the criteria for downlisting or delisting.

The Council will ask the secretaries of Commerce, the Interior and State to consider renegotiating or withdrawing from the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC). Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds said the convention remains an obstacle to addressing cultural harvest.

“This Convention undermines U.S. law, which is the ESA, because it prevents us from actually allowing a cultural harvest,” Simonds said. “It’s either renegotiating and adding the exemption for cultural harvest, or leave the Convention.”

Longline Sea Turtle Measures

After discussing sea turtle measures affecting the Hawai’i shallow-set and American Samoa longline fisheries earlier in the meeting, the Council finalized recommendations to evaluate potential regulatory changes. Existing regulations remain in place while alternatives are developed and analyzed.

For the Hawai’i shallow-set fishery, the Council will prepare an amendment for action in December with final action in March 2027. The analysis will include economic impacts from existing trip limits and the effect of a crew training program begun in 2024 on the condition of loggerhead and leatherback turtles released from fishing gear.

Hawai’i Council member Eric Kingma said the shallow-set fishery has undergone extensive management changes over the years and supplies about half of the U.S. swordfish production.

“It is worth continuing to review the measures if the science shows there would be little impact,” Kingma said.

The Council also requested timely NMFS analyses needed for the action, including any ESA consultation, and coordination with scientists updating North Pacific loggerhead and Western Pacific leatherback population assessments.

For the American Samoa longline fishery, the Council approved a similar review, with initial action planned for December and final action in March. The review will include consulting with fishermen on the operational impacts of sea turtle measures established under the Council’s Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan Amendment 5.

The Council requested the NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center use available observer data to evaluate the effects of Amendment 5 on turtle interactions and target and nontarget catch, including silky and oceanic whitetip sharks.

Papahānaumokuākea Actions Finalized

The Council also finalized recommendations on fishing in Papahānaumokuākea.

For bottomfish, the Council will work with NMFS, its Scientific & Statistical Committee and fishermen to develop an experimental fishing permit to collect information needed to support sustainable fisheries in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument and National Marine Sanctuary.

The Council will continue to review existing Magnuson-Stevens Act regulations to determine whether changes to management measures are needed.

In response to NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries request for fishing regulations, the Council concluded existing federal fishery regulations meet the purposes and policies of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act and the sanctuary's goals and objectives. These include limited-access programs, gear restrictions, catch limits, protected species mitigation measures and prohibited-area management. Therefore, additional sanctuary-specific fishing regulations are unnecessary.

Reference: Wallace, B.P. & Broderick, A.C. 2025. Chelonia mydas (Green Turtle). The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2025.

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
A Council authorized by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976
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