

Compensation Plan Proposed for MPA-Affected Fishers in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

The U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has proposed a plan to provide financial compensation to bottomfish and lobster-fishery permit holders affected by the designation of the 362,000-km² Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. All commercial fishing in the MPA, located in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, will officially end in 2011. By buying up permits from existing permit-holders, the compensation plan would essentially speed up that phaseout of fishing. Former President George W. Bush designated the MPA in 2006 (*MPA News* 8:1).

The proposed compensation plan is available online at <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2009/pdf/E9-7860.pdf>, and was open for public comment from April through 4 May. It identifies eligible permit holders affected by the MPA designation and provides a mechanism to compensate them for the economic value of their permits, based on a mathematical formula. The proposal also would allow eligible participants to receive additional compensation in return for giving up their fishing vessel and gear, provided such vessels and gear would no longer be used for fishing.

Once finalized, the plan will be voluntary for permit holders to accept. NMFS is authorized to spend US \$6,697,500 on the program.

The region is not heavily fished. There are just eight remaining permit holders for bottomfish in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). And the lobster fishery has been closed by federal fishery managers since 2000 - six years before the MPA was designated - due to low lobster populations and potential impacts of the fishery on endangered seals.

Toby Wood of NMFS justifies the buyout of lobster permits despite the lack of activity in that fishery. "While the lobster fishermen have been held to a zero-harvest guideline in the NWHI since 2000, the permits still exist," he says. "The potential of re-opening the NWHI lobster fishery has continued to be the hope of many fishermen who still hold their permits." Wood points out that the federal law authorizing NMFS to draft a compensation plan (*The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008*) specifically stated lobster permit holders would be eligible, as well as bottomfish permit holders.

Previous effort to compensate NWHI bottomfishers

This is not the first attempt to set up a compensation program for bottomfish permit holders affected by the Papahānaumokuākea designation. Upon establishment of the marine national monument in 2006, the Pew Charitable Trusts took responsibility for negotiating and funding a buyout plan with bottomfishers. The goal of that effort, similar to the current NMFS proposal, was to speed the phaseout of fishing and smooth the fishermen's transition to retirement or alternative employment.

Most bottomfishers did not participate in those negotiations, however, and Pew withdrew in late 2006. "We were sincere in our pledge to offer fair compensation based on the historic value of the permit to the fisherman," says Jay Nelson of Pew. "We withdrew our offer when it was clear that a majority of the fishermen were holding out for a potentially more lucrative federal buyout."

While Pew still supports the concept of a compensation program for the bottomfish permit holders, it does not support the lobster-permit buyout in this case. "Almost a decade after the lobster stocks collapsed, and in light of the absence of their recovery, it would be hard to argue that the remaining lobster permit holders deserve compensation as a consequence of the monument designation," says Nelson. "Even the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended in early 2006 [prior to monument designation] that the lobster fishery be permanently closed."

Compensation of fishers affected by closed areas is more common in other nations than in the U.S. Australia paid tens of millions of dollars to fishing-license holders through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Structural Adjustment Package, in response to the creation of large new no-take zones in the marine park (*MPA News* 7:7). Other MPA-related compensation programs for affected fishers were described in our June 2002 issue (*MPA News* 3:11). Prior to the current NWHI compensation plan, the main U.S. program of its kind involved Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska. Most commercial fishing in the park was phased out beginning in the late 1990s. In response, the U.S. Congress - prompted by an influential Alaskan

senator - allotted US \$23 million to compensate fishing-permit holders, crew, processors, and local communities expected to suffer lost income due to the closure.

Wood of NMFS says he does not expect the NWHI compensation program, in its final form, to serve as a model for other MPA situations. "By nature, MPA designations and any resulting compensation programs involve many unique, and often complex, sets of considerations that should be addressed on a case-by-case basis," he says.

For more information:

Toby Wood, National Marine Fisheries Service, Honolulu, Hawai'i, U.S. E-mail: Toby.Wood@noaa.gov

Jay Nelson, Pew Environment Group, Juneau, Alaska, U.S. E-mail: JNelson@pewtrusts.org

Source URL: <https://www.openchannels.org/news/mpa-news/compensation-plan-proposed-mpa-affected-fishers-northwestern-hawaiian-islands#comment-0>