

False Killer Whale Take Reduction Team Reaches Unanimous Consensus on a Draft Take Reduction Plan

The False Killer Whale Take Reduction Team – a diverse group that includes the Hawai‘i longline fishing community, conservation organizations, researchers and government agencies – reached a unanimous consensus agreement on a Draft Take Reduction Plan to reduce false killer whale bycatch in the Hawai‘i-based longline fleet.

The consensus Draft Plan, formally submitted on Monday, July 19, to the Pacific Islands Regional Office of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), was finalized during the fourth of a series of meetings convened since February 2010. The meeting was held last week in Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

The aim of the Draft Plan is to reduce false killer whale bycatch by the Hawai‘i-based longline fishery below a level set by NMFS, as required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). This level, known as the “Potential Biological Removal” level or PBR, is defined in the MMPA as the “maximum number of animals, not including natural mortalities, that may be removed annually from a marine mammal stock while still allowing that stock to reach or maintain its optimal population level.”

The Draft Plan is grounded in several key recommendations. One recommendation calls for the mandatory use of circle hooks with a maximum wire diameter of 4.5 mm in the tuna-targeting deep-set longline fishery, a gear change that is expected to reduce the likelihood of hooking false killer whales, as well as increase the likelihood of a hooked individual being released without being seriously injured. Another aspect of the Draft Plan includes the proposed closure of a seasonal area north and east of the main Hawaiian Islands, where longline fishing is currently allowed for four months of the year. The aim of this proposed closure is to protect both pelagic and insular false killer whales that may occupy the closed area. Other recommendations in the Draft Plan include experiments to test the effectiveness of “weak” hooks designed to bend and straighten under the pull strain of a hooked false killer whale; mandatory handling and release training for vessel owners and captains regarding entangled or hooked false killer whales; and a suite of research recommendations intended to help assess the effectiveness of the Draft Plan and provide better information on long-term solutions to reduce false killer whale bycatch. Team members agreed that the recommendations, taken together as a suite of actions, have a high likelihood of achieving the goal of reducing bycatch below PBR.

The consensus Draft Take Reduction Plan will now be considered by NMFS as it develops proposed regulations.

The Draft Plan was ratified by individuals from the following entities: Hawaii Longline Association, Hui Malama I Kohola, Hawai‘i Wildlife Fund, Center for Biological Diversity, The Humane Society of the United States, University of Hawai‘i, Coastal Marine Research, Duke

University, Cascadia Research Collective, NMFS, State of Hawai'i, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, and the Marine Mammal Commission.

The deliberations were facilitated by CONCUR, Inc., a firm specializing in building agreements on complex natural resource issues.

A copy of the Draft Plan is available at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr>.