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COURT ASKED TO CLOSE LOBSTER FISHERY TO PROTECT MONK SEAL IN HAWAII

HONOLULU, HI--Greenpeace Foundation, Center for Biological Diversity, and Turtle Island Restoration Network, plaintiffs in a federal court lawsuit filed in January seeking to protect the critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal from the impacts of commercial fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, have gone into court asking Judge Samuel P. King to issue a preliminary injunction preventing the commercial lobster fishery from opening this year. The motion, filed yesterday by Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund on the plaintiffs' behalf, cites new evidence linking the lobster fishery to the seal's decline.

Scientists have known since the early 1990s that juvenile monk seals at tiny French Frigate Shoals, the seals' main breeding colony, have been starving due to lack of available prey. Since the endangered monk seal -- found only in Hawaiian waters -- now numbers only about 1,300, the loss of these animals is of grave concern. Fewer female monk seals will reach reproductive maturity, and fewer monk seals will be born in the near future, so the decline is expected to continue.

Although the National Marine Fisheries Service has for many years denied that the lobster fishery threatens the species' survival, recent scientific research supports what many, including the Marine Mammal Commission, have been saying all along: the commercial lobster fishery, which destroyed lobster stocks in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands through rampant overfishing in the 1980s, is contributing to the seals' desperate plight.

Scientists have recently confirmed that lobster is a major component of the Hawaiian monk seal diet, that lobster contains more of many of the nutrients essential to the seals' health than any other prey item, and that seals at French Frigate Shoals have to travel farther, and dive deeper, to find food than seals elsewhere in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands where lobster fishing has been less intense. Moreover, fisheries scientists recently disclosed that lobster stocks, which had never recovered fully from the 1980s, when lobster boats harvested some 2 million lobsters each year, are now at such low levels that the commercial lobster fishery in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands has effectively destroyed itself. These are among the reasons that caused the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team, a group of scientists selected by the National Marine Fisheries Service to help the monk seal avoid extinction and recover, to call last month for the lobster fishery's closure.

Earthjustice attorney Paul Achitoff explained: "The National Marine Fisheries Service and the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council can no longer hide behind claims that the scientific evidence won't support closing the lobster fishery. Just the opposite is true; all of the evidence shows that the fishery is helping to drive the Hawaiian monk seal to extinction. We're asking the court to prohibit any commercial lobster fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands this year, and we hope that the ban will continue so that both the lobsters and the seals that depend on them have a chance to recover."

The motion for a preliminary injunction is scheduled to be heard on April 21.

The commercial lobster fishery in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is a relatively small fishery, with only about five boats active in the last few years because lobster has been getting more and more scarce. Like similar fisheries around the world, it markets its catch of spiny and slipper lobster as frozen lobster tails. The Hawaiian monk seal, which is thought to have been in Hawai`i for 15 million years, is one of the most endangered marine mammals on earth.

