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## Questions and Answers

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### 1. Why is the President making this announcement?

Coral reefs are in trouble all over the world. They are being degraded and destroyed at rapid rates by warming of the ocean, pollution, over-fishing and a host of other factors. At the National Ocean Conference in 1998, President Clinton took action to help save U.S. coral reefs by establishing

the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force and directing federal agencies to avoid harming coral reefs. Approximately 70 percent of all coral reefs located in U. S. waters surround the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). These extensive reef systems are some of the most pristine reefs left in U.S. waters. In May 2000, the President directed the Secretaries of Commerce and Interior, working cooperatively with the State of Hawaii and consulting with the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, to develop recommendations for a new, coordinated management regime to increase protection of the coral reef ecosystem of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and provide for sustainable use of the area. Upon consideration of the recommendations following the interagency discussions and recommendations following the public visioning sessions, the President is providing immediate protection for the NWHI coral reef ecosystem. It is intended to bring together state and federal agencies to help address the global coral reef crisis by protecting this national treasure for future generations.

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## **2. What does a Reserve designation mean?**

This is a new marine protected area designation under new authority provided to the President in the National Marine Sanctuaries Amendments Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-513). This Act authorizes the President to designate any Northwestern Hawaiian Islands coral reef or coral reef ecosystem as a coral reef reserve. The Reserve will be managed by the Secretary of Commerce, in a manner consistent with the purposes and policies of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, and in accordance with the Executive Order. NOAA is also directed to begin the process to designate the Reserve as a National Marine Sanctuary. In doing so, the Secretary shall supplement or complement the existing Reserve.

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## **3. Where are the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands?**

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are a chain of small islands, atolls, submerged banks, and reefs beginning approximately 120 nautical miles west of the main Hawaiian islands, and stretching northwest for more than 1,079 nautical miles or 2,000 kilometers. This vast archipelago is uninhabited (except for Midway Island) and is surrounded by some of the most extensive and pristine coral reefs in U.S. waters. The coral reefs are part of a unique marine ecosystem found nowhere else on Earth. The reefs and related ecosystems include a diverse variety of habitats extending from the archipelago's shorelines to approximately 50 nautical miles offshore, and to depths of 100 fathoms (183 meters).

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#### **4. What is so special about the NWHI?**

Approximately 70% of all coral reefs in U.S. waters are in the NWHI. The NWHI ecosystem includes approximately 13,000 square kilometers or 3,600 square nautical miles of coral reefs with a diverse and unique assemblage of fish, invertebrates, birds, sea turtles, marine mammals and other species. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands include a much greater diversity of reef habitats than the main Hawaiian Islands, and is home to a variety of federally protected species, including the threatened green sea turtle, the endangered leatherback and hawksbill sea turtles, seabirds, and the only remaining population of the endangered Hawaiian monk seal.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands provide vital habitat for a variety of migratory species, including several species of marine mammals (e.g., spotted dolphins, humpback whales), sea turtles, and over 14 million seabirds that use the ecosystems for nesting, feeding and raising young.

Numerous archaeological artifacts found on several of the islands establish a close relationship with the Hawaiian culture, with evidence of both prehistoric seasonal and permanent settlements, as well as use of the area for religious purposes. Some of the religious sites resemble those found elsewhere in the Marquesas and Tahiti, possibly indicating a link to early Polynesian cultures. The more recent history of the islands is one of both commercial and military usage for a range of purposes, from pearling and fishing to guano mining, which wrought significant changes in topography, flora and fauna. This area is also the site of one of the oldest National Wildlife Refuges, the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, designated in 1909 by President Theodore Roosevelt.

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#### **5. What activities currently occur in the NWHI coral reef ecosystem?**

There is relatively little human activity currently taking place in the NWHI. Today, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is the only one of these fragile, remote islands open for public visitation. Tourists are invited to visit Midway to learn about and enjoy its unique wildlife, marine and historic resources. The number of visitors allowed on the atoll at any one time is limited to reduce impacts to wildlife. A small number of photographers and film crews are permitted to work in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to provide information to the public. Additionally, the University of Hawaii at Hilo offers courses.

Only one fishery (bottomfish) is currently active in federal waters of the NWHI; two additional Fishery Management Plans for crustaceans (lobster) and precious corals, that are not currently active. There is also some recreational fishing in the area. Federal and state agencies conduct a variety of other activities, such as research, monitoring and enforcement, to fulfill their management responsibilities for federal and state resources, including the Midway Atoll and Hawaiian Island National Wildlife Refuges, the state wildlife refuge on Kure, and to help protect and recover protected,

threatened and endangered species.

The NWHI coral reef ecosystem is also the site of ongoing scientific and monitoring activities to explore, map and better understand the unique ecosystem. These efforts are often joint projects among many partners, including the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, the University of Hawaii, and others.

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## **6. What are the primary ecosystem threats to the NWHI?**

Some of the primary threats to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are from natural processes such as major winter storms, periodic hurricanes, and tidal waves. In the mid-1970s to late 1980s, changing oceanographic conditions (decadal shift) may have caused the islands' biological productivity to decrease, affecting food availability for all of the resident animals.

Major anthropogenic threats to the ecosystem are marine debris, invasive species and possible overuse by humans. Such "overuse" by people includes a number of different activities, e.g., vessel groundings, pollution from ships and other vessels, derelict fishing gear, derelict military and commercial infrastructure, land development, the introduction of alien species, and ecotourism impacts. Concern has been raised about fishing interactions with monk seals, lobster trap impacts on coral reefs, marine mammal entanglement in fisheries debris, seal consumption of toxic discards, and prey depletion. Although strictly regulated, recreational and commercial fishing are among the more contentious management issues in the area.

Ocean currents have deposited thousands of tons of marine debris and derelict fishing gear from the North Pacific onto the islands, atolls, and reefs of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The nets and lines can entangle and drown monk seals, sea turtles, seabirds, as well as scour coral reefs. Floating plastic debris is eaten by adult seabirds and fed to their young. Marine debris is also thought to be a potential conduit for the accelerated introduction of alien species to coral reef ecosystems.

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## **7. What kinds of fishery pressures now exist?**

The fisheries of the NWHI are small in terms of the number of vessels that participate, and the volume and value of the fisheries landings. These managed fisheries appear to have a relatively small impact on the coral reef ecosystem, especially when compared to the impacts of derelict fishing gear from outside of Hawaii, other marine debris, and other human impacts. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Councils Proposed Coral Reef

Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan provides for management of a variety of types of marine harvesting (e.g., ornamental fish, live rock, bioprospecting) as well as commercially harvested species.

The Bottomfish Fishery consists of two limited entry zones: one with 7 permits (around Nihoa and Necker Islands) and another with 10 permits (the distant islands out to Kure Atoll). The total number of active vessels in the fishery has ranged from 3 to 13 (7 in 1998). Total annual revenues from the fishery have averaged about \$1million/year. The managed bottomfish species are healthy.

The Crustaceans (Spiny and Slipper Lobster) Fishery consists of a limited entry fishery (capped at 15 permits) of which fewer than half are active (1 vessel in 1995, 9 in 1997, and 6 vessels making 6 total trips in 1998). The fishery is closed from December 1 to June 30 of each year to reduce the potential for affecting monk seals during the pupping season. Fishing is prohibited in closed areas within 20 nm of Laysan Island and within 10 fathoms around all of the NWHI. The fishery is currently closed pending the resolution of uncertainties in the current stock assessment model.

The Pelagics (Swordfish, Tuna species, others) Fishery is prohibited within a 50 nm zone around the NWHI and thus exerts no fishing pressure on the area.

The Precious Corals Fishery is managed under the comprehensive Fisheries Management Plan, and the fishery is not currently active.

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## **8. What was the President's directive in May, and what has been accomplished since the announcement?**

In May 2000, the President directed the Secretaries of Commerce and the Interior to develop a plan to provide strong and lasting protection for the NWHI coral reef ecosystem. Specifically, the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce, in coordination with the State of Hawaii and in consultation with the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Council, initiated an administrative process to cooperatively develop recommendations for a new, coordinated management regime to increase protection of the coral reef ecosystem and provide for sustainability. This process began with "visioning" sessions, which were open hearings for public comment on the future of the NWHI coral reef ecosystem. These public visioning sessions provided extensive input from a wide variety of groups that helped shape the final recommendations. Additional input on the future of the NWHI was gathered from other sources, such as the extensive public input and research conducted by the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Council in development of their draft Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan.

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## 9. What is the size of the Reserve?

The area designated as the Reserve is 131,800 square statute miles or 99,500 square nautical miles. It is approximately 1,200 statute miles long and 100 miles wide. This is seven times the size of the existing area in the National Marine Sanctuary System, and is as large as the entire National Park System or the combined areas of Florida and Georgia. The Reserve will include marine waters and submerged lands of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, shall be adjacent to and seaward of the boundary of Hawaii State waters and submerged lands and the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, and will include the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to the extent it extends beyond Hawaii State waters and submerged lands.

<i>Approx.</i>	<b>Statute Miles</b>	<b>Nautical Miles</b>	<b>Kilometers</b>	<b>Acres</b>
<b>Length</b>	1,200	1,042	1,931	--
<b>Width</b>	115	100	185	--
<b>Area</b>	131,800m <sup>2</sup>	99,500nm <sup>2</sup>	341,360km <sup>2</sup>	84,365,000

Some comparisons: The Reserve is, about half the size of Texas, is comparable in length to the distance from Los Angeles to Seattle, is 7 times larger than the total area of the current 13 National Marine Sanctuaries, and is almost as large as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in Australia (102,043 nm<sup>2</sup>.) The Reserve is the second largest marine protected area in the world, and is the largest protected area in U.S. history.

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## 10. What is the area of coral reef habitat under federal jurisdiction within the Reserve?

While the actual coral reefs extend only extend to about 50 fathoms (100 meters), other habitats with important interactions with the reefs extend to approximately 100 fathoms. Approximately 3.3 percent (2.7 million acres) of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve is coral reef habitat (all submerged areas <100 fathoms) under Federal jurisdiction (excluding State waters).

The approximate total area of coral reef habitat (all submerged areas <100 fathoms) under federal jurisdiction (excluding State waters):

4,300 square statute miles	3,250 square nautical miles
11,140 square kilometers	2,753,000 acres

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## 11. What is the area of the Preservation Areas? How much of the Reserve is in the Preservation Areas?

Approximately 4.8 percent of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve is within the 15 Reserve Preservation Areas. The approximate total area of reserve preservation areas in the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve area is:

6,350 square statute miles	4,795 square nautical miles
16,450 square kilometers	4,065,000 acres

This area is larger than previously reported because of 12 nm buffers surrounding Pearl Bank and Hermes Bank

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## **12. What is the Reserve Council, how will it be selected, how will it operate?**

The President directed the Secretary of Commerce to establish a Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve Council, pursuant to the authorities for advisory councils in the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. The Council will provide advice and recommendations to NOAA on the Reserve Operations Plan and the designation and management of any sanctuary. The Council will play an important role in helping shape these initiatives and provide lasting protection to the marine resources of the Reserve and sanctuary. Individuals may apply to be members of the Council representing various aspects of the community from recreational fishing interests to Native Hawaiian interests. NOAA will screen applications after considering input from the Department of Interior and the State of Hawaii. An alternate will be chosen for each seat to ensure adequate representation should a Council member be unable to attend a meeting. The Council will operate under a charter developed by NOAA, which prescribes the frequency of meetings, objectives and roles, and operation of the Council. All travel costs to meeting locations for Council members will be paid by NOAA. Council meetings will be open to the public.

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## **13. What types of management actions will be put in place in the Reserve?**

The President's Executive Order provides Management Principles, conservation measures and Reserve Preservation Areas for the Reserve, and directs the Secretary to develop a Reserve Operations Plan. The Reserve will build on existing efforts and encourage strong partnerships to fulfill its protection and management functions. Management actions will include the monitoring and removal of marine debris; research; monitoring and assessment of the Reserve's resources; and enforcement of conservation measures and Reserve Preservation Areas. Activities prohibited include exploration for oil and gas, anchoring on coral; drilling, dredging, or otherwise altering the seabed; discharging or depositing any material (except for gray water); and the removal, taking, or harvesting any

living or non-living coral reef resource or species except as expressly allowed in the Executive Order. All consumptive activities (e.g. fishing, taking of coral) are prohibited in Reserve Preservation Areas, except that the existing bottomfishing (under permit) is allowed in 8 of 15 such areas.

Management techniques, such as marine zoning, will also ensure protection from degradation and harm. Additionally, non-regulatory activities, such as research, education and outreach, and the restoration and remediation of degraded and injured Reserve resources, will be developed in cooperation with many partners, and in conjunction with the Reserve Operations Plan and Sanctuary Management Plan development processes. The Reserve Advisory Council will also be an important component in identifying issues and disseminating information about management measures to the various users of the Reserve.

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#### **14. How will you enforce the management measures?**

NOAA will apply its authority under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. The Act promotes cooperative enforcement with other government agencies, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, and state fisheries authorities. Efforts to enforce new Reserve prohibitions will build upon the existing efforts by these agencies. Enforcement issues and strategies will be addressed in the the Reserve Operations Plan and Sanctuary Management Plan. NOAA will also continue to apply its enforcement authorities under other laws, including the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

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#### **15. How will a Reserve correct the problem of marine debris in the Hawaiian Islands?**

The Reserve will build upon the existing efforts of the interagency partnership, including the recommendations outlined at the 2000 Marine Debris Conference, to clean up this very serious threat to the resources in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. This also includes bringing to bear new authorities and resources to address the problem. The new authorities prohibit destruction, loss or injury to any Reserve or Sanctuary resources. Efforts may also include working with U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Coast Guard and the International Maritime Organization to address the issue of preventing the debris at its source.

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## **16. How will this affect Native Hawaiians or the State of Hawaii?**

Native Hawaiians have a strong traditional connection to the land and natural resources of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and NOAA wants to encourage their participation in management of this protected area. The Reserve recognizes Native Hawaiian non-commercial subsistence, cultural, and religious uses consistent with existing law. NOAA will work with Native Hawaiian interests to identify those areas where uses of the Reserve's resources may be conducted without injury to coral reef ecosystem or related marine resources or species. These areas may be revised after public review and comment and consideration of recommendations from the Reserve Council. While state waters and submerged lands are not part of the Reserve, NOAA will work with the state and the Department of Interior for coordinated conservation of the area. During the sanctuary designation process NOAA will work with the state to determine whether state waters and submerged lands should be included in a sanctuary.

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## **17. Will a Reserve affect the existing fishing industry in NWHI?**

Fisheries have always been very limited in these remote island areas. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council have strictly limited existing fisheries in the NWHI to date under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and will continue to manage the fisheries in this region in accordance with the Executive Order. There are four Fishery Management Plans for this region. The Executive Order caps all existing fishing effort at recent or current levels and provides for 15 Reserve Preservation Areas in which all consumptive uses, including recreational and commercial fishing, will not be allowed, except for bottomfishing (under permit) in 8 of the 15 Reserve Preservation Areas. The President proposes that these Reserve Preservation Areas become permanent, and has initiated a 30-day public comment period on this proposal.

Three of the Preservation Areas (French Frigate Shoals, Pearl and Hermes Bank, and Kure Atoll) restrict all fishing activities in federal waters to a depth of 100 fathoms. Portions of these areas are already off-limits to fishing. Four submerged-bank Preservation Areas will also be off-limits to fishing activities. Recreational fishing is currently limited in some portions of the Preservation Areas, and is prohibited throughout the Preservation Areas.

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## **18. Why cap current fishing efforts?**

During the public visioning session on the future of the NWHI, many people expressed concern that growth in fishing efforts in the NWHI could harm the

coral reef ecosystem. While the commercial fisheries of the NWHI are not overfished, some believe that capping fishing at current levels is a sound management step both to provide long-term protection of the ecosystem and to allow for some continued extractive use of the area through fishing. The President has asked the Secretary of Commerce to collect public input on this and other conservation measures in the new Executive Order.

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### **19. Who will manage fisheries within the Reserve?**

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, working with the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council and NOAA's National Ocean Service, will continue to have a direct role in managing the fisheries of the NWHI. These entities will work closely to manage the fisheries in accordance with the Coral Reef Reserve Executive Order.

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### **20. How much of the Reserve will be closed to all fishing?**

Some or all fishing activities are restricted in the Preservation Areas, which make up approximately 4.8 percent of the total Reserve area. Outside of these areas, fishing will be capped at current levels.

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### **21. Why is the public comment period only 30 days?**

The President has asked the Secretary of Commerce to collect public input on the conservation measures and whether the Preservation Areas should become permanent. The 30-day comment period allows time for the public to provide input on these questions, and time for the President to consider the public input before he leaves office in late January. The 30-day comment period on the Executive Order builds on public comments received during visioning sessions on the future of the NWHI held in the summer of 2000. In addition, these efforts build on extensive public comments gathered during the past two years on a variety of management measures in the NWHI, including possible closure areas, through the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council in development of its draft Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan. Additional public comment periods will be held in the future, on designation of the Reserve as a National Marine Sanctuary.

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## **22. Does this designation mean I can still take my boat out into the Reserve to dive?**

Yes. Diving is allowed if undertaken in accordance with the conservation measures. These measures include no anchoring on coral, and no removal, moving, taking, harvesting, or damaging of any living or non-living coral resource or species. For example, spearfishing in a Reserve Preservation Area would not be allowed, but underwater photography would be.

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## **23. How will this impact ecotourism?**

NOAA recognizes that an increase in ecotourism is of significant concern. Any Sanctuary management plan will detail how ecotourism-related activities will be permitted and regulated within the protected area. All uses must be consistent with the management principles in the Executive Order and would be subject to the conservation measures and Reserve Preservation Areas. These principles emphasize protection and conservation of the coral reef ecosystem and the related marine resources and species of the NWHI.

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## **24. How will this Reserve interact with the Department of the Interior and the National Fish and Wildlife Refuges?**

The Executive Order directs the Secretary of Commerce to work with the Department of the Interior and the State of Hawaii to develop a memorandum of agreement (MOA) for coordinated conservation and management of the Reserve, the Midway Atoll and Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuges, and state waters and submerged lands. Where the Reserve overlaps the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, the Reserve shall be managed to supplement and complement the refuge. It is expected that cooperative effort will look beyond jurisdictional boundaries and ensure viability of the region's collective resources for generations to come.

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## **25. How will the Reserve be funded?**

The National Marine Sanctuaries Amendments Act of 2000 authorizes \$4 million for the Reserve and the designation of the Reserve as a marine sanctuary for each year through 2005. These efforts could be funded

through the Commerce, State and Justice appropriations for NOAA. NOAA has currently received funds in its appropriations for coral reef conservation activities. It is expected that a portion of these funds will be used for activities involving the Reserve. The National Marine Sanctuaries System will provide support through the utilization of staff resources and expertise. NOAA will also work with state partners to make the most efficient use of the existing resources in the NWHI.

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## **26. How long will it take to designate a sanctuary?**

It is expected that the Sanctuary designation process will take two to three years. The Sanctuary will build upon the protections established by the President in his Executive Order. During this time, public input will be sought to determine the most appropriate resource protection and management measures for NWHI marine resources, uses of these resources, as well as the protection of historical/cultural resources consistent with the management principles in the Executive Order.

The designation process will benefit from the advice and recommendations of a Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve Council to be established by NOAA. The Reserve Council will include representatives from the non-federal science community, Native Hawaiian interests, the State of Hawaii, the commercial and recreational fishing industries, environmental organizations, the ocean-related tourism industries, and others. Throughout the designation process, NOAA will work closely with all governmental and non-governmental partners.

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## **27. What if the Sanctuary is not designated?**

Should the Sanctuary not be designated before October 1, 2005, the NMSA directs that the Secretary shall conduct a review of the management of the Reserve.

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Revised February 04, 2001 by [NWHI Web Group](#)

National Ocean Service | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration | U.S. Department of Commerce  
<http://hawaiiireef.noaa.gov/qanda/qanda.html>