

## US seeks to protect parrotfish, reefs in USVI (Update)

March 15 2013, by Danica Coto

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U.S. officials are seeking to limit the number of parrotfish caught in federal waters off St. Croix to help protect the brightly colored species, as well as fragile Caribbean coral reefs.

The National Marine Fisheries Service began collecting public comments on its proposal this week before issuing a decision. The agency would establish a minimum size limit on parrotfish, long a popular dish in St. Croix, the largest of the three U.S. Virgin Islands.

An estimated 142 of 177 small businesses in St. Croix are likely to be affected by the proposal, which calls for an 8- to 9-inch limit of certain parrotfish species, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service. The proposal would apply to both commercial and recreational fishermen.

Parrotfish make up nearly 37 percent of all fish commercially caught in St. Croix in terms of pounds, compared with 2 percent in Puerto Rico and 7 percent in St. Thomas and St. John.

If the proposal is approved, St. Croix could see a loss of up to 13,900 pounds (6,300 kilograms) of parrotfish a year, and a total annual revenue loss ranging from \$4,800 to nearly \$70,000 for small businesses, the federal agency found.

The losses could be a big hit to fishermen in St. Croix, which is still reeling from the January 2012 closure of the Hovensa oil refinery.

Gerson Martinez, a St. Croix fisherman, said in a phone interview that while he agrees with the proposed regulation after reaching a compromise with U.S. officials, it would still have a significant impact if approved.

"That's what people eat here," he said. "It's a fish that generations of people have loved for its taste. Restaurants sell a lot of them."

Martinez used to sell up to 1,000 pounds (454 kilograms) of parrotfish a week to restaurants, but he has since switched to more lucrative lobster fishing.

Federal officials say they want to further protect parrotfish because they eat a significant amount of algae, which can smother and kill reefs. The fish also has become more relevant in the past 30 years given the demise of the longspine sea urchin, which grazes on algae, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The Caribbean has nearly 8,000 square miles (20,720 sq. kilometers) of coral reefs, most of which are in very poor state. Many have been killed by warm waters and suffocated by algae and seaweed.

U.S. officials say the proposal would also ensure survival of the parrotfish species.

Andrea Treece, an attorney with San Francisco-based Earthjustice, said she was pleased with the proposal. But she said it does not affect a lawsuit the organization filed in January 2012 against the National Marine Fisheries Service, alleging that federal regulators violated the Endangered Species Act by allowing the harvesting of parrotfish at high rates.

"It's important to allow parrotfish to get big enough so they can

reproduce successfully," she said in a phone interview.

Earthjustice is representing environmental groups such as the Center for Biological Diversity. A judge is currently reviewing the case, Treece said.

In December 2011, the U.S. government prohibited the harvest in U.S. Caribbean waters of the three largest parrotfish species: blue, midnight and rainbow. It also limited recreational harvesting of parrotfish.

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