

Obama creates world's largest marine protected area

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In this Aug. 4, 2016 file photo, President Barack Obama speaks during a news conference at the Pentagon. The White House says that Obama will expand a national monument off the coast of Hawaii, creating the world's largest marine protected area. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

President Barack Obama on Friday expanded a national monument off the coast of Hawaii, creating a safe zone for tuna, sea turtles and thousands of other species in what will be the world's largest marine

protected area.

Obama's proclamation quadrupled in size a monument originally created by President George W. Bush in 2006. The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument will contain some 582,578 square miles, more than twice the size of Texas.

The president is slated to travel to the monument next week to mark the new designation and cite the need to protect public lands and waters from climate change. The president was born in Hawaii and spent much of his childhood there.

In expanding the monument, Obama cited its "diverse ecological communities" as well as "great cultural significance to the Native Hawaiian community and a connection to early Polynesian culture worthy of protection and understanding."

The monument designation bans commercial fishing and any new mining, as is the case within the existing monument. Recreational fishing will be allowed through a permit, as will be scientific research and the removal of fish and other resources for Native Hawaiian cultural practices.

The regional council that manages U.S. waters in the Pacific Islands voiced disappointment with Obama's decision, saying it "serves a political legacy" rather than a conservation benefit.

The council recommends catch limits and other steps designed to sustain fisheries. It said it recommended other expansion options that would have minimized impacts to the Hawaii longline fishery, which supplies a large portion of the fresh tuna and other fish consumed in Hawaii.

"Closing 60 percent of Hawaii's waters to commercial fishing, when

science is telling us that it will not lead to more productive local fisheries, makes no sense," said Edwin Ebiusi Jr., chairman of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council "Today is a sad day in the history of Hawaii's fisheries and a negative blow to our local food security."

Sean Martin, the president of the Hawaii Longline Association, said his organization was disappointed Obama closed an area nearly the size of Alaska without a public process.

"This action will forever prohibit American fishermen from accessing those American waters. Quite a legacy indeed," he said in an email to The Associated Press.

The Pew Charitable Trusts helped lead the push to expand the monument. It says research shows that very large, fully protected marine reserves are necessary to rebuild fish populations and diversity of species.

"By expanding the monument, President Obama has increased protections for one of the most biologically and culturally significant places on the planet" said Joshua S. Reichert, an executive vice president at Pew.

The White House is describing the expansion as helping to protect more than 7,000 species and improving the resiliency of an ecosystem dealing with ocean acidification and warming. It also is emphasizing that the expanded area is considered a sacred place for Native Hawaiians.

Shipwrecks and downed aircraft from the Battle of Midway in World War II dot the expansion area. The battle marked a major shift in the war. Obama will travel to the Midway Atoll to discuss the expansion.

With the announcement, Obama will have created or expanded 26 national monuments. The administration said Obama has protected more acreage through national monument designations than any other president.

The White House said the expansion is a response to a proposal from Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz and prominent Native Hawaiian leaders. The federal government will also give Hawaii's Department of Natural Resources and Office of Hawaiian Affairs a greater role in managing the monument, an arrangement requested by Schatz and Gov. David Ige.

Ige signed off on the expansion Wednesday, telling Obama in a letter that there had been tremendous debate on the issue locally. In the end, he decided the "proposal strikes the right balance at this time for the waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands, and it can be a model for sustainability in the other oceans of planet Earth."

But American Samoa's delegate in the House of Representatives, Aumua Amata, said the monument expansion would place an already economically challenged territory at greater risk.

"Our local fishing industry, which comprises more than 80 percent of the local economy, depends heavily on access to these waters," Amata said.

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