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## ENDANGERED SPECIES: Enviros seek protection for black-footed albatross

**Andrew Freedman, Greenwire reporter**

Environmentalists filed a petition this week with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to add the black-footed albatross to the endangered species list, arguing that longline fishing poses a serious threat to the species' survival. Earthjustice, acting on behalf of the Turtle Island Restoration Network and the Center for Biological Diversity, contends the large seabirds are being driven to extinction by longline fishing. Most of the birds nest in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands and travel across the Pacific Ocean in search of food, often diving at the bait of longline hooks. The black-footed albatross was decimated by feather and egg hunting earlier this century and currently number about 55,000 breeding pairs for a total of about 278,000 birds, according to the petition.

Longline fishing, which employs a single-strand line that can be many miles long with thousands of baited hooks, is the preferred open-water gear used to catch tuna, swordfish and other large commercial fish in the Pacific Ocean. While catch rates for longline fishing are low, the catch is often of higher commercial value than fish caught by other methods. Environmentalists have increasingly challenged the practice, however, because sea turtles, porpoises and other marine life are often hooked and killed as bycatch.

"Longline fishing kills many thousands of migratory seabirds each year by turning otherwise natural foraging habits into acts of unwitting suicide," the Earthjustice petition states.

Black-footed albatross are especially vulnerable to bycatch because they mate for life, returning each year to the same nest site. The death of one mating partner can thus have a significant effect on the reproduction rate on the species, the petition states.

The petition comes on the heels of a decision by the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council to reopen the Western Pacific swordfish fishery to longline fishing at half its previous capacity, with new measures taken to protect seabirds, such as using weights to encourage lines to sink below the ocean surface and instituting rescue procedures for seabirds accidentally brought on board a vessel alive.

The council -- which governs about 1.5 million square miles of waters surrounding American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii and other U.S. territories -- has allotted fishers 2,120 "sets" of swordfish annually, with each set amounting to about a day's catch. Prior to a 2001 ban on swordfish harvesting between the equator to the North Pole, council fishers hauled in about 4,300 sets, or 7 million pounds of swordfish annually (Greenwire, Nov. 26, 2003).

According to the petition, the 100-vessel strong Hawaiian swordfish fishing fleet was responsible for as many as 8,000 albatross deaths annually before the temporary closure in 2001. Prior to the closure NMFS estimated about 3,200 black-footed and Laysan albatross were accidentally killed each year, but that number dropped to just 116 in 2002. With the end of the ban, the petition states, "mortality rates similar to those prior to the closure can be expected to return."

Council senior scientist Paul Dalzell said the ESA petition is another attempt by environmental groups to shut down longlining

altogether. "It's a strategic move by Turtle Island who have been very vociferous about trying to shut down pelagic longline fishing," Dalzell said. That group is involved in a separate lawsuit over the effects of longlining on sea turtles.

According to Dalzell, the western Pacific longline fleet is subject to the strictest bycatch regulations of any U.S. fishery, making it "the most environmentally responsible longline fishery in the world." He said council members will soon consider proposals to institute side-setting techniques, whereby vessels set their longlines from the side of boats rather than off the stern. Side-setting is thought to be a possible way to avert seabird bycatch because birds are more reluctant to dive alongside a ship than in the more open areas behind them, he said.