

V.I. designated a fishing community

Fishermen hail new status, which requires considering catch limits' economic impact

By JOY BLACKBURN
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The Caribbean Fishery Management Council on Tuesday approved a motion to designate the U.S. Virgin Islands "fishing communities" as the council develops annual catch limits on additional species in federal waters around the territory.

The fishing community designation recognizes the territory's historical, social and economic ties to fishing — and means the council must, during its deliberations, consider the impact that the proposed catch limits would have on the communities.

"It's just something the council is acknowledging and will take into account as they go through the deliberations," said Roy Crabtree, the Southeast Regional Administrator for the National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries and a voting member of the Caribbean Fishery Management Council.

The council is meeting this week in Fajardo, Puerto Rico.

Crabtree made the motion to designate St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John — as well as four sectors in Puerto Rico — fishing communities as the council considers an amendment that would set catch limits on all federally managed fish species that are not considered overfished in federal Caribbean waters.

The council already has passed new commercial fishing regulations that set catch limits on certain species that are considered overfished in those waters, including snappers, groupers, parrotfish and queen conch.

The proposed catch limits the council is now developing would address all the other species.

Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen and local fishermen hailed the council's decision to designate the Virgin Islands a "fishing community."

Two recent NOAA studies found that the U.S. Virgin Islands exhibited the qualities of a fishing community and found that St. Croix and St. Thomas should be considered for the designation, Christensen said in a statement released by her office.

"We followed up on those findings and encouraged the Council to discuss the matter," Christensen said. "I am pleased that the Virgin Islands received the designation and I would like to thank Regional Director Roy Crabtree, the Council

and especially the St. Thomas and St. Croix Fishermen's Associations, who worked hard to make this happen."

Julian Magras, chairman of the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association, said he was pleased with the designation and thanked Christensen for her help.

"It means that before the council makes any decisions on any regulations for the Virgin Islands, they're going to have to take into consideration that we're a fishing community — and the impact that the rules and regulations would have on the community," Magras said. "The council now has to go the extra mile to really see what the impacts are going to be for the Virgin Islands — not only for the fishermen, but the whole community."

"We've been pushing this issue since 2005," said David Olsen, also of the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association.

The designation is important "because we think they were ignoring impacts of the regulations on the community," Olsen said.

The fishing community designation is "a victory," Christensen said in an interview.

"Because it's not a designation that's been used very much, it's up to us to really work it and make it meaningful," she said. "It does give our fishing community more leverage."

Crabtree said the process for approving the catch limits will not change with the designation.

"The council will take the data they have and make the best decisions they can," he said.

The council will be conducting public meetings and hearings in the territory in 2011 as it moves forward with developing the catch limits.

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