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Trump Lifts Commercial Fishing Ban On Key Protected Area In Central Pacific - Press April 8 2025

Members of the Trump administration signaled that Papahānaumokuākea, the protected area around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, could be next.

President Donald Trump has opened one the largest protected swaths of the Central Pacific Ocean to commercial fishing, lifting a ban that sought to help conserve the region's imperilled fish, shark, sea turtles, marine mammals and other species.

With that executive order, which Trump signed Thursday, U.S. fishing fleets are poised to again access waters within the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument. That area, previously called the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, provides environmental protections to a group of remote islands and atolls, plus about 495,000 square miles of ocean around them.

The move was swiftly condemned by local conservation groups, who called Trump's order a blow to the effort to protect critical pockets of biodiversity across the Pacific. Environmental law advocates said the order exceeds Trump's presidential authority and that they're prepared to press the matter in federal court.

Seafood industry interests, meanwhile, touted the order as a way to reduce regulatory overreach and global trade imbalances linked to industrial fishing.

Trump's order further raises questions over whether additional protected U.S. territorial waters in the Pacific, most notably the Papahānaumokuākea marine protected area, might also be opened to commercial fishing. A provision in the order calls on the U.S. Commerce Secretary to review all other marine monuments and within 180 days recommend whether any additional areas should be opened to commercial fishing.

Papahānaumokuākea was designated a Marine National Monument in 2006. It also was designated a Marine National Sanctuary on Jan. 16 — but it requires “45 days of continuous session of the U.S. Congress” for those added sanctuary protections to take



effect. It wasn't clear Thursday whether those 45 Congressional days had passed.

Such commercial fishing is currently banned in the Northwestern Hawaiian Island waters of Papahānaumokuākea, which cover more than 528,000 square miles of ocean. Longline fishing is also banned at least 50 miles offshore of Hawai i's main islands.

However, U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick wondered at Thursday's signing ceremony “why wouldn't we have our fishermen fish there?” referring to the U.S. territorial boundaries off Hawai i and American Samoa. Standing next to Lutnick at the ceremony was Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds, who has long opposed marine protected areas across the Pacific and advocated for commercial fishing in those waters.

Palmyra Atoll, which lies about 900 miles south of Hawai i, is one of several atolls and islands included in the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. An executive order on Thursday opened the entire protected area to commercial fishing. (Courtesy: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



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An Abrupt Reversal

Johnston Atoll, Wake Island, Jarvis Island, Palmyra Atoll/Kingman Reef and the Baker and Howland Islands have been protected since President George W. Bush established the Pacific Islands Heritage Monument in 2009.

It banned deep-sea mining and commercial fishing in their waters out to 50 miles.

President Barack Obama then expanded the monument more than fivefold in 2014 by pushing the boundary out to the federal limit of 200 miles around all the islands and atolls except Palmyra/Kingman and Baker and Howland.

The area that Trump now has poised to open to commercial fishing would cover the Obama-expanded areas, from 50 miles to 200 miles out.



An animated map showing the changes in the Pacific Marine National Monuments borders over time.

In recent years there was a campaign to expand the Pacific Island Heritage monument's remaining 50-mile boundaries to 200 miles, plus designate it as a sanctuary, similar to the steps taken at Papahānaumokuākea.

That expansion effort was scrapped, however, when Trump took office.

Maxx Phillips, the Center for Biological Diversity's Hawai'i and Pacific Island director, said in a statement Thursday that the remote Pacific island areas now poised to see commercial fishing "are not just dots on a map — they are lifeboats of biodiversity and cultural heritage."

"This reckless decision trades ecological integrity for short-term industry gain," Phillips said, "and will have lasting impacts on marine life already pushed to the brink."

Supporters of lifting the commercial fishing bans in marine protected areas argue the restrictions aren't effective because the tuna stocks and other large pelagic fish species they aim to help don't stay in those protected areas.

Nonetheless, University of Hawai'i-led research published in 2022 in the journal *Science* found that Papahānaumokuākea's commercial fishing bans created a "spillover" effect that boosted the number of tuna and benefited the nearby commercial fishing catch rates outside of the monument's borders.

Commercial fishers "can't fish there now and they can't fish there later unless Congress changes the law," Henkin said Thursday. Earthjustice, he added, is prepared to challenge Trump's order in court.