

State of Hawaii
DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES
Division of Aquatic Resources
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

May 22, 2026

Board of Land and Natural Resources
State of Hawaii
Honolulu, Hawaii

SUBJECT: Request Approval to Enter into a Project Agreement between the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii (RCUH) for the Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR) Research Project Entitled "Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approval is requested to enter into a new Project Agreement between DLNR-DAR and RCUH. The Project Agreement, entitled "Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach," is scheduled to run from October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2027. The Project Agreement provides \$937,000.00 from a combination of Federal funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program (\$759,000.00), and DAR's Aloha I Ke Kai Special Fund (\$178,000.00). The Project Agreement allows DAR to secure assistance from RCUH to meet project goals and objectives efficiently and in a timely manner.

Project Objectives

- 1) Survey the diversity and abundance of marine fish species targeted by recreational fishers across 11 managed areas and 13 unprotected control locations on O'ahu, Maui, and Kaua'i, and collect and analyze data to assess changes in fish populations over time.
- 2) Conduct detailed habitat and environmental monitoring surveys at select coral reef and artificial reef sites on O'ahu, Maui, and Kaua'i to evaluate changes in habitat health and associated effects on finfish populations.
- 3) Evaluate the effectiveness of fisheries management actions by surveying fish populations and habitat conditions in areas with lay gillnet restrictions on O'ahu and assessing island-wide gillnet ban impacts on Maui, including comparisons with appropriate control sites.
- 4) Perform targeted habitat recovery monitoring surveys at Pila'a on the north shore of Kaua'i to track ecosystem response and recovery trends.
- 5) Conduct fishing activity and intercept surveys at key sites on O'ahu, Maui, and Kaua'i to improve understanding of fishing effort, catch success, and factors influencing fish population trends.
- 6) Provide statewide education, outreach, and training to disseminate scientific knowledge, engage communities, and promote stewardship and sustainable management of Hawai'i's aquatic resources for public benefit.

Duration

The Project Agreement is scheduled to run from October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2027.

Funding Sources

Federal funds in the total amount of \$759,000.00 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program, and \$178,000.00 from DAR's Aloha I Ke Kai Special Fund.

HRS Chapter 343 - Compliance with Environmental Law

This Project Agreement will continue to involve the use of state lands (submerged lands zoned in the Conservation District, Resource subzone) and use of state funds. The Department has determined that the actions to be conducted under the project will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment. See the Division's proposed Determination of Exemption from the preparation of an environmental assessment (attached).

REMARKS

The purpose of this project is to conduct statewide marine fisheries and habitat research, monitoring, and assessment to evaluate the status, trends, and sustainability of Hawai'i's aquatic resources. The project will include fish and habitat surveys, fishing activity monitoring, and targeted studies to assess the impacts of fishing pressure, environmental conditions, and management actions, including gear restrictions and habitat enhancement efforts such as artificial reefs. Data collected will be used to inform adaptive management, evaluate the effectiveness of fisheries regulations and managed areas, and support science-based decision-making. The project also includes education and outreach to disseminate findings, engage the public, and promote stewardship and sustainable use of Hawai'i's marine resources.

Maps of the project survey sites are attached. In addition, see the following link for the most recent final report submitted to the primary federal award agency (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) of this project for more information:

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:US:775c25ce-b37a-4349-9840-103bf9f52948>

Approval to enter into this Project Agreement is being requested concurrently from the Governor, through the Department of Budget and Finance. Also, the Project Agreement is being prepared for submission to the Attorney General's Office for preliminary approval as to form and content. DAR is aware that the implementation of this Project Agreement depends on the receipt of all required approvals and the availability of funds, and that funding restrictions may occur at any time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, the Division of Aquatic Resources requests:

1. That the Board, based on the attached proposed Declaration of Exemption prepared after consultation with and on advice of those having similar expertise in exemption determinations for the proposed actions under the Project Agreement, declare that the actions which are anticipated to be undertaken under this Project Agreement will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are therefore exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment;
2. That the Board authorize the Chairperson to approve and execute the Division of Aquatic Resources Project Agreement entitled "Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach," with the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii, subject to approval as to form and content by the Department of the Attorney General; and
3. That the Board delegates to the Chairperson the authority to:
 - a. Approve and execute all future Division of Aquatic Resources Project Agreements and forthcoming amendments with the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii, subject to approval as to form and content by the Department of the Attorney General; and
 - b. When appropriate, declare that actions that are anticipated to be undertaken under these Project Agreements will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are therefore exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment.

Respectfully submitted,



BRIAN J. NEILSON
Administrator

APPROVED FOR SUBMITTAL:

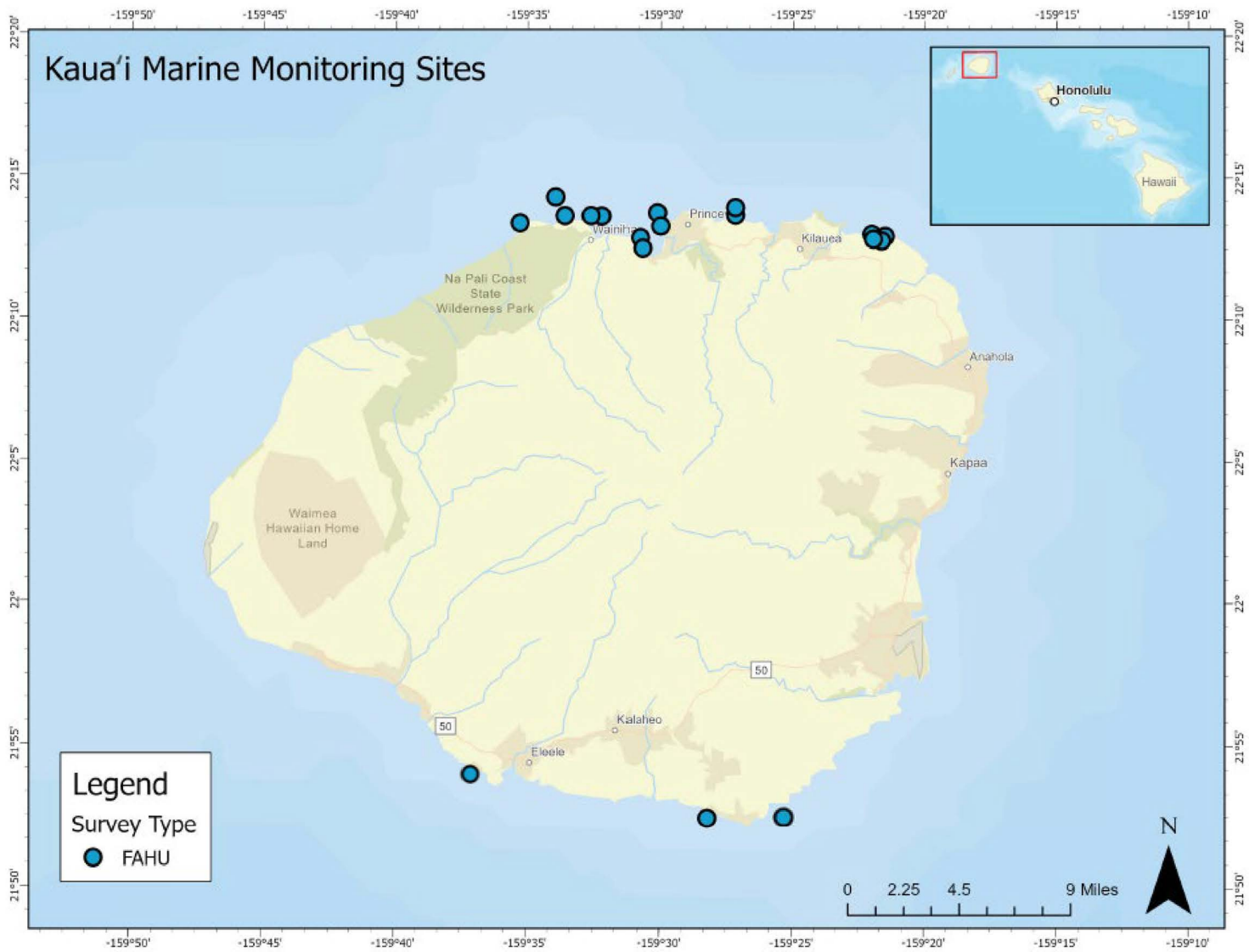


RYAN K. P. KANAKA'OLE
Acting Chairperson

Attachment

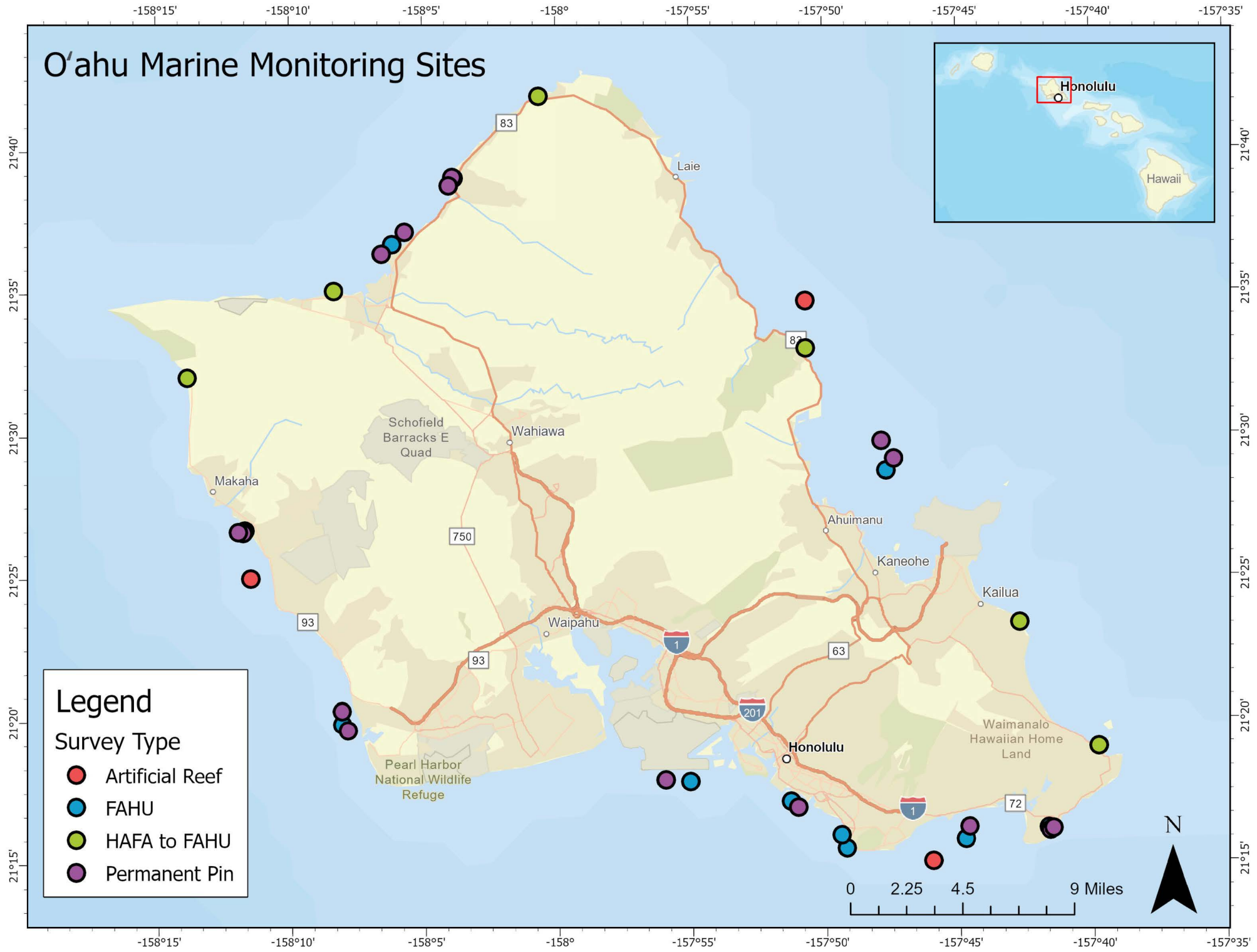
Maps of survey sites

Declaration of Exemption – Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach



Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

O'ahu Marine Monitoring Sites



Legend

- Survey Type
- Artificial Reef
 - FAHU
 - HAFA to FAHU
 - Permanent Pin

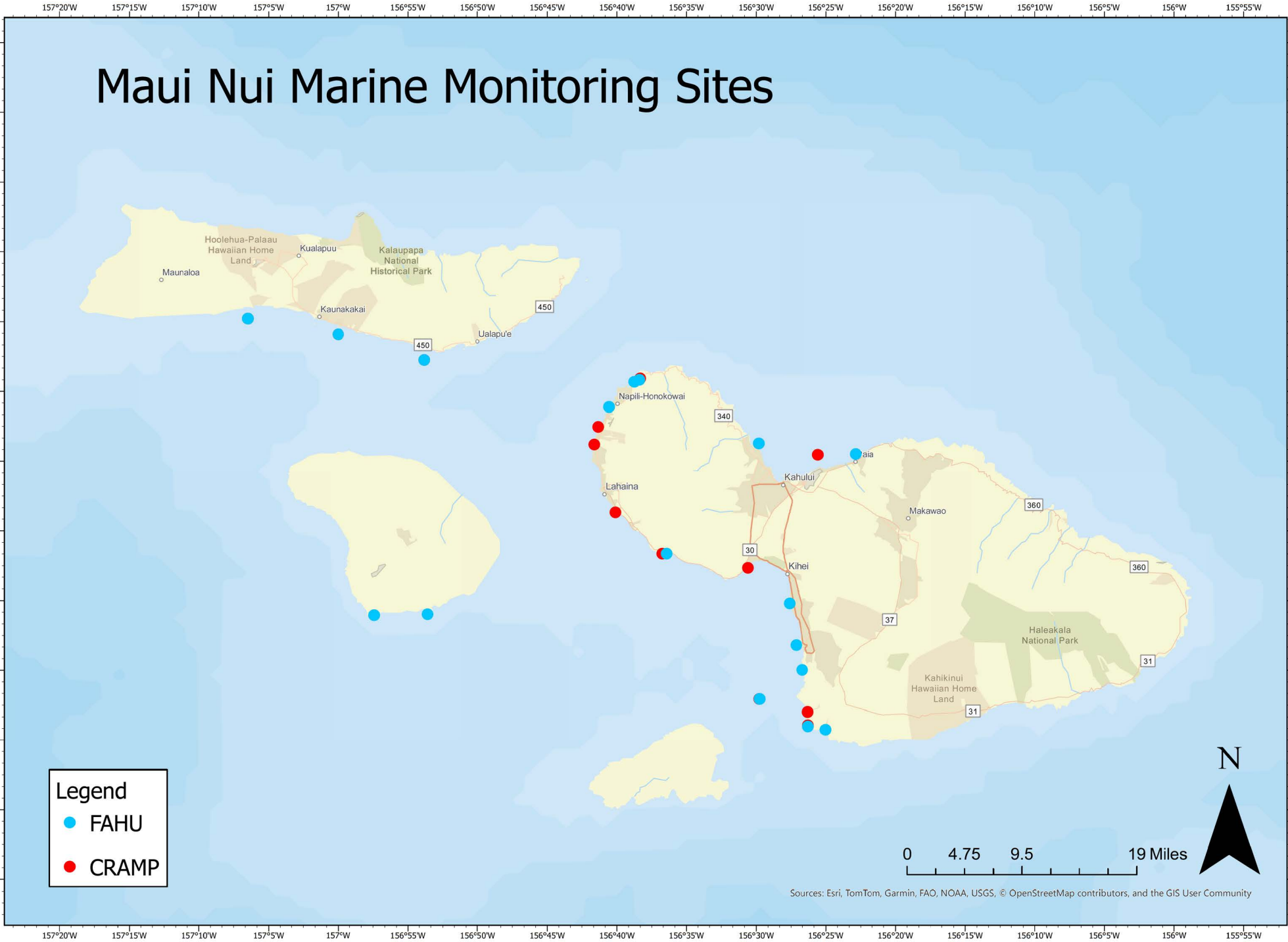
Maui Nui Marine Monitoring Sites

Legend

- FAHU
- CRAMP

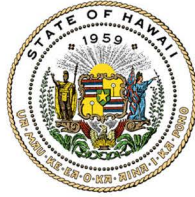


Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community



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KAHOOLAWE ISLAND RESERVE COMMISSION
LAND
STATE PARKS

May 22, 2026

TO: Division of Aquatic Resources File

THROUGH: Ryan K. P. Kanaka'ole, Acting Chairperson 

FROM: Brian J. Neilson, Administrator 
Division of Aquatic Resources

SUBJECT: Declaration of Exemption from the Preparation of an Environmental Assessment under the Authority of Chapter 343, HRS, and Chapter 11-200.1, HAR, for a Request Approval to Enter into a Project Agreement between the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii (RCUH) for the Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR) Research Project Entitled "Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach."

The following Project Agreement activities are found to be exempted from preparation of an environmental assessment under the authority of Chapter 343, Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS) and Chapter 11-200.1, Hawaii Administrative Rules (HAR):

Project Title: Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach

Project Description: The purpose of this project is to conduct statewide marine fisheries and habitat research, monitoring, and assessment to evaluate the status, trends, and sustainability of Hawai'i's aquatic resources. The project will include fish and habitat surveys, fishing activity monitoring, and targeted studies to assess the impacts of fishing pressure, environmental conditions, and management actions, including gear restrictions and habitat enhancement efforts such as artificial reefs. Data collected will be used to inform adaptive management, evaluate the effectiveness of fisheries regulations and managed areas, and support science-based decision-making. The project also includes education and outreach to disseminate findings, engage the public, and promote stewardship and sustainable use of Hawai'i's marine resources.

Key project objectives during the grant period include the following:

- 1) Survey the diversity and abundance of marine fish species targeted by recreational fishers across 11 managed areas and 13 unprotected control locations on O'ahu,

DLNR/RCUH Project Agreement – Statewide Marine Resource Monitoring and Outreach
May 22, 2026

- Maui, and Kaua‘i, and collect and analyze data to assess changes in fish populations over time.
- 2) Conduct detailed habitat and environmental monitoring surveys at select coral reef and artificial reef sites on O‘ahu, Maui, and Kaua‘i to evaluate changes in habitat health and associated effects on finfish populations.
 - 3) Evaluate the effectiveness of fisheries management actions by surveying fish populations and habitat conditions in areas with lay gillnet restrictions on O‘ahu and assessing island-wide gillnet ban impacts on Maui, including comparisons with appropriate control sites.
 - 4) Perform targeted habitat recovery monitoring surveys at Pila‘a on the north shore of Kaua‘i to track ecosystem response and recovery trends.
 - 5) Conduct fishing activity and intercept surveys at key sites on O‘ahu, Maui, and Kaua‘i to improve understanding of fishing effort, catch success, and factors influencing fish population trends.
 - 6) Provide statewide education, outreach, and training to disseminate scientific knowledge, engage communities, and promote stewardship and sustainable management of Hawai‘i’s aquatic resources for public benefit.

Consulted parties: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program; NOAA CREP; UH CRAMP

Exemption Determination: After reviewing §11-200.1-15, HAR, including the criteria used to determine significance under §§11-200.1-13, HAR, DLNR has concluded that the activities under this Project Agreement would have no significant effect on the environment and that approval of the Project Agreement is categorically exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental assessment based on the following analysis:

1. All activities associated with this Project Agreement have been evaluated as a single action. Since this research Project Agreement involves activities that are precedent to a later planned activity, i.e., the monitoring and collection of data and research, the categorical exemption determination here will treat all planned activities as a single action under §11-200.1-10, HAR.
2. The General Exemption Type #5 for Basic Data Collection and Scientific Research with no Serious or Major Environmental Disturbance Appears to Apply. §11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, exempts the class of actions that involve “basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource and infrastructure testing and evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.” This exemption class has been interpreted to include data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities related to Maui, Oahu, and Kauai marine resources, such as those being proposed.

The proposed activities here appear to fall squarely under the exemption class identified under §11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, and as described under the revised 2020 DLNR Exemption List (Concurred on by the Environmental Council on November 10, 2020) under the General Exemption Type #5 (Part 1), items #1, #2, and #13, respectively, which includes “conduct[ing] surveys or collect[ing] data on existing environmental conditions”,

“non-destructive data collection and inventory, including field, aerial and satellite surveying and mapping” and “research that the Department declares is designed specifically to monitor, conserve, or enhance native species or native species' habitat”.¹

3. Cumulative Impacts of Actions in the Same Place and Impacts with Respect to the Potentially Particularly Sensitive Environment Will Not Be Significant. Even where a categorical exemption appears to include a proposed action, the action cannot be declared exempt if “the cumulative impact of planned successive actions in the same place, over time, is significant, or when an action that is normally insignificant in its impact on the environment may be significant in a particularly sensitive environment.” §11-200.1-15(d), HAR. To gauge whether a significant impact or effect is probable, an exempting agency must consider every phase of a proposed action, any expected primary and secondary consequences, the long-term and short-term effects of the action, the overall and cumulative effect of the action, and the sum effects of an action on the quality of the environment. §11-200.1-13, HAR.

Significant cumulative impacts are not anticipated as a result of this activity, and numerous safeguards further ensure that the potentially sensitive environment of the project area will not be significantly affected. All activities will be conducted in a manner that will not diminish the quality of marine resources or their ecological integrity, and the proposed activities will not have any indirect, secondary, cultural, or cumulative effects.

Since no significant cumulative impacts or significant impacts with respect to any particularly sensitive aspect of the project area are anticipated, the categorical exemptions identified above should remain applicable.

4. Overall Impacts will Probably have No Significant Effect on the Environment. Any foreseeable impacts from the proposed activity will be further mitigated by general and specific conditions attached to the Project Agreement. Specifically, all research activities covered by this Project Agreement will be carried out with strict safeguards for the natural, historic, and cultural resources, other applicable laws and agency policies, and standard operating procedures.

Conclusion. Upon consideration of the Project Agreement to be approved by the Board of Land and Natural Resources, the potential effects of the above listed project as provided by Chapter 343, HRS and Chapter 11-200.1 HAR, have been determined to be of probable minimal or no significant effect on the environment and exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment.

¹ Exemption list for DLNR, approved on November 10, 2020. See Office of Environmental Quality Control (OEQC) website: http://oeqc2.doh.hawaii.gov/Agency_Exemption_Lists/State-Department-of-Land-and-Natural-Resources-Exemption-List-2020-11-10.pdf