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Report of the American Samoa Archipelago Fishery Ecosystem Plan Team Meeting

Tuesday, April 20, 2010
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
DMWR Conference Room
Pago Pago, American Samoa

1. Welcome and Introductions

Ben Carroll, acting Chair, opened the American Samoa Plan Team (PT) meeting. Other PT members in attendance included: Doug Fenner, David Hamm, and Michael Quach. Council staff in attendance included Eric Kingma, Kelly Finn, Kitty Simonds, Joshua DeMello and Fini Aitaoto. Also present was Domingo Ochavillo (DMWR), Marlowe Sabater (DMWR), Ray Tulafono (DMWR), Nonu Tuisamoa (DMWR) and Adam Bailey (NMFS PIRO).

2. Approval of Draft Agenda

The agenda was approved with the following change:

- Crustaceans and precious coral module to be presented together after bottomfish module

3. Fishery Management Issues

A. Annual Catch Limits (ACLs)

B. Catch Shares

C. Offshore Aquaculture Amendment

D. Modification to the Longline Limited Entry Program

Council staff, presented an overview of the fishery management actions currently being considered by the Council.

Fenner asked how Annual Catch Limits were set with the difference in jurisdiction between Federal and territorial waters. Staff responded that the ACL was set on the stock and NMFS would only enforce the ACL on the Federal portion. Hamm asked about if we'd have to allocate an ACL for each? Staff responded that each species in the fishery would need an ACL and that the SSC is currently working on determining what is in the fishery and which species would require ACLs.

Fenner asked if there are sufficient data for making those decisions in the coral reef fishery? Staff responded that the ACLs are a mandate and that the Council has to make decisions on the best available data. Sabater noted that some of the species are being lumped into species groups for the development of ACLs. Carroll said that not all species are harvested and life histories for these species may have been worked on elsewhere (e.g. Australia).

The PT members had concerns about all the permits for the American Samoa longline limited entry program being taken by non-American Samoans. Sabater noted that in other fisheries such as spearfishing, the fishery is dominated by other island nations such as Tonga. Staff noted that the Advisory Panel was also concerned and made a recommendation to the Council to allow citizens of American Samoa to hold the permit only.

The replacement of the alia fleet, as opposed to rebuilding, was also discussed. Members noted that Western Samoa is no longer using the small alia, only the large super alia. Hamm asked about the tie in with the chartering action and how this could tie in. Staff responded that they are related in the larger issue of how we are going to best develop the fisheries here and take care of the communities and explained that the chartering arrangement is expected to bring monetary and economic benefits to AS.

Hamm noted that for catch shares, other than the longline fishery, we don't have basic information to use this tool for other fisheries. He said that a community catch share might be reasonable but the data is still limited. Staff responded that this could be done through the Community Development Program process if requested. Sabater asked who the stakeholders would be in this allocation. Staff responded that it would be the participants in the fishery, or those with records of participating. Sabater said the commercial database and license records could be used.

4. Update on Fishing in the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument

Council staff provided an overview of the proposed Rose Atoll MNM fishing regulations. The term 'customary exchange' was described as recommended by the Council at its 147th meeting.

PT members asked questions regarding who would take care of the reporting and permitting. Staff said that because the expected participation is likely to be low it may not need to be a Federal responsibility, it may be locally managed.

Staff also explained that the Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary is considering adding Rose Atoll to their program. Hamm said that even to do minor activities like driving a boat through sanctuary waters is difficult.

Sabater added that he is on a monthly conference call with an intergovernmental group regarding Rose Atoll and noted that there is no good reason for the 50 mile closure. Hamm brought up the issue of the mismatched boundary between the Monument designation and the existing large vessel area closure. Fenner asked why the large vessel closed area was put in place around Swains and Rose as he said there are no people on Rose and thus no boats based there, and it is too dangerous to fish from Swains in a small vessel. The purpose was to protect small boat fishermen, but there are none around these islands. Staff noted that to modify the MNM closed area would need the President's approval or an act of Congress. The PT discussed reducing the Swains closed area but noted they would need to talk to the Jennings family for any action at Swains. Hamm cautioned that any boundary changes should only be delineated to the nearest minute for reporting purposes.

The Plan Team continued to discuss the large vessel closed area and recommended the Council should re-visit the efficacy and purpose of the existing large vessel closed area. They also suggested that the longline limited entry program amendment add in spatial alternatives to revise the large-vessel closed area.

5. Fisheries Development

Council staff provided the PT with an overview of the American Samoa Marine Conservation Plan, the Sustainable Fisheries Fund, and fishery development activities in American Samoa.

Sabater asked about the Council's idea to provide a fuel station on Manua? He said they don't have the capacity to monitor the fuel and there should therefore be an on-site supervisor so the fuel doesn't end up being used by the community for non-fishery purposes. He also noted that the DMWR's plan for a boat ramp in Leone is being held up by the landowner who wants an exorbitant fee for use of the ramp. He added that the location of a boat ramp on the west side of the Tutuila will be difficult due to geography and population issues. The PT noted that Leone may be better and serve more people. Sabater also noted that Leone port development has a port administration proposal pending.

6. Data Collection and Monitoring

A. Recommendations from Data Workshop

Council staff reported on the Council's data workshop in November 2009 and the recommendations made by the group.

The PT focused on recommendations made for American Samoa. After a brief discussion, the PT members said that it is best for DMWR to review the recommendations in-house and provide a priority ranking for the Director to take to the FDCC meeting in June.

B. Biosampling

Dave Hamm gave an update on the NMFS biosampling program to be established in the Western Pacific region. He said that NMFS is planning to improve and expand sampling on all non-pelagics in each of the island areas. There are three facets to this program, the first of which is market sampling (complete census of catches for species composition, length-weight for size structure, and eventually age structure). He said that these are being established as ongoing permanent sampling programs. The second part is getting a sub-sample of those species of most concern and commercially valuable and focusing on the top five species (to collect otoliths, gonads for spawning seasonality and fecundity) and adding their information into the "barcode of life." The barcode of life is a global DNA database that collects data from fin clips and reference photos and samples to be used for genetic analysis. Hamm noted that each area will need to conduct its program differently. In Guam, their contractor is working with the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association to collect samples and they are developing contracts with universities and other institutes for analysis. He said one of the challenges is finding capable contractors in each area and being able to pay for fish on the spot. He said that in American Samoa, capacity building and gaining support with the fishing community will be the top priorities

Council staff provided an introduction to the Council's community data collection website, Fishbox.org. Hamm asked about who and how the information would be used. Staff responded that the goal is to eventually use the data in ecosystem management. Hamm said a lot of this info is being collected already in the island areas data collection creel surveys (tides, weather, moon phases). He suggested lunar analysis of fish data if available.

C. Cooperative Research Priorities

Kelly Finn, Council staff, went over the coop research program and reviewed prior recommendations and current status.

Quach noted that WPacFIN provided the recreational fishery in American Samoa with data forms (paper and electronic) to document their recreational fishing history. He noted that they had buy in from 15 fishers but no one has turned in the forms. Sabater noted that they collect information at tournaments for their creel surveys.

Sabater also said that the FAD research was important for them. He noted that they developed a FAD management plan for Sportsfish Resotation funding, but the USFWS said that it lacked current information. He said that they are trying to get the plan reviewed, but considers this research a priority, and noted that it should be concurrent with DMWR's FAD management plan.

7. Annual Report

A. Module for Coral Reef Fisheries

Carroll gave a quick overview of the coral reef fisheries. He noted that shore-based fisheries reported a large catch in early 90's due to high atule catches. He also noted that boat-based catch has recently increased due to increased effort in the bottomfish fishery. Carroll said that the Alia are moving from trolling to bottomfishing and that spearfishing has increased lately (post SCUBA ban) although effort is still low.

Kingma asked about the level of creel samplers. Tuisamoa said that there is one surveyor in Manua and two boat-based creel samplers in Tutuila. For the shore-based survey, there are 2 samplers.

The PT noted that since fishing effort is low, where biomass is reduced there must be other factors besides fishing, which are affecting the coral reef. They noted that reef flats could be affected by nutrient enrichment and sedimentation and the changes in percent coral cover also may affect reef fishes.

Sabater asked if there is another source of data to fill in the large data gap from '97-'04 which occurred by no sampling effort. He said that there are issues such as certain times where 'no catch' data weren't collected thereby causing problems with CPUE and expansion issues and that the data collection gaps make expansion nearly impossible.

B. Module for Bottomfish Fisheries

Sabater presented the bottomfish module with data up to 2009. He reported that '82-'85 was the beginning of the fishery, and at the end of the 80's it waned as fishers moved to trolling. He said

that some of the data can be explained by hurricanes and showed that 2006 was the all time low in the fishery. Sabater noted that the main species are different than Hawaii's fishery and that the BMUS are only 42% of total bottomfish landings. He noted that the humpback snapper is the main species caught and that fishers don't really target any one species.

D. Report on Precious Coral and Crustacean Fisheries

Fenner reported that there is no intentional precious coral fishery in American Samoa and that the crustaceans information is incorporated into the coral reef module. He then reported on a petition to list 83 species of corals under ESA and the potential impacts this could have. He said that the NGOs used info from a group he participated in.

There was discussion by the PT on the effects of listing these species under the ESA on the coral reef fisheries.

E. Ecosystem Indicators

The PT discussed the affect of the September 2009 tsunami in American Samoa. Fenner reported that in general, the tsunami damage can be compared to that on land, whereby if you drive around the island, many areas were unaffected. The same is true underwater. He said he knows of one small reef that was ruined, and that Vatia had the most damage due to the waterfall effect of receding waters. He said that Rose and Swains had some breakage but that can't be pinned on the tsunami as it could have been other factors. There was no damage at Manua and Fagatele had above average damage (facing water on left side). He also reported that in Leone there are areas of untouched reef but other areas where broken reef was swept back and forth causing more damage. He imagines that when CRED averages all their data on reefs, the damage will be undetectable.

The PT discussed adding EPA water quality information to the annual report, as CRED takes some water samples during their surveys. They also discussed adding socioeconomic information as well as information from climate change and MPA-related surveys.

8. Review of Previous Recommendations

Council staff presented the PT with the previous meetings recommendations regarding the use of scientific names for the catch database and the need for species identification training and a standardized data collection protocol. He noted that the NMFS response to this was that they have been working hard to put the local names into the database and that species identification can be done by local biologists. . He also noted that the standardized data collection protocol for all fishery data collected in the region was a recommendation by the data workshop and should be addressed at the FDCC meeting.

There was discussion by the PT on the need for species identification training and members noted that it could be done locally, but needs to be done on a continuous basis due to the turnover in creel survey staff.

9. Public Comments

There was no public comment.

10. Discussion and Recommendations

The American Samoa Plan Team recommended:

1. The Annual Report include a summary of landings for all species across all gears and surveys, followed by appendices that breakout the landings and effort by survey.

The annual report should be similar to what Marlowe provided to the PT at its meeting that looked at the offshore survey.

2. The Council should re-visit the efficacy and purpose of the existing large vessel closed area.

Council staff should look into adding spatial alternatives to the limited entry program amendment.