



Meeting of the American Samoa REAC

October 16, 2017

8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Governor H. Rex Lee Auditorium (Fale Laumei)

Utulei, Tutuila

REPORT

1. Welcome and Introductions

Christinna Lutu-Sanchez, Chair and Council member, welcomed the Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC) members and asked participants to introduce themselves. Participants included Archie Soliai, Council member; Carlos Sanchez, Longline Services Inc.; Chris King, Port Administration; Elinor Lutu-McMoore, National Weather Service (NWS); Maria Vaofanua and Domingo Ochavillo, Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR); Francis Leiato, American Samoa Community College Land Grant; Mike King, Coalition of Reef Lovers; Jason Bordelon, National Park Service (NPS); Lt. Tanner Stiehl, US Coast Guard; Brian Peck, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); Jeremy Raynal and Kim Maguire, Coral Reef Advisory Group (CRAG); and Melanie Brown, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO). Also present were Ray Tulafono, Will Sword, John Gourley, Mike Goto, Mike Duenas, and Council staff Sylvia Spalding, Charles Kaaiai, Joshua DeMello, Becky Walker, and Nate Ilaoa.

2. Essential Fish Habitat

a. Update on Habitat Program

Becky Walker, Council staff, gave a presentation on the habitat program consisting of the expected outcomes for agenda item 2, a background on essential fish habitat (EFH), and an overview of the Council's habitat program. Walker sought input from the REAC on available EFH levels of information for the American Samoa FEP management area; non-fishing impacts to EFH; and on their agency's habitat policy. Regional fishery management councils are required to define EFH for each species in the management unit, as well as minimize adverse impacts from fishing on habitat, and describe non-fishing activities which may adversely affect EFH and provide associated conservation and enhancement recommendations in support of ecosystem-based fisheries management. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) broadly defined EFH for its management unit species in 1999, with the limits of substrate EFH extending to the 700 m isobath and the water column EFH extending to the limit of the exclusive economic zone. In 2016, the Council adopted new objectives for its FEPs, which including refining EFH and minimizing impacts to EFH through the identification and prioritization of research. Currently, five EFH reviews are underway in various stages. The next two agenda items covered the first stages of the research and information needs review, which is

documenting an inventory of available EFH information for datasets with observations of multiple species, and scoping of the Council's review of non-fishing impacts to EFH.

There were no questions on the overview presentation.

b. EFH Levels of Information

Walker presented a background on the EFH Levels of Information, the timeline for the review of research and information needs, and preliminary results of data discovery activities. Councils are encouraged to organize EFH information according to various levels, and describe EFH based on the information with the highest level of detail. The levels of information encompass distribution data, density by habitat types, growth and survival rates by habitat types, and productivity by habitat type. Councils evaluate the various sources of information based on their scientific rigor while ensuring that enough habitat is conserved to maintain the yield of manage species and their contribution to a healthy ecosystem. This meeting is the beginning of the data discovery phase, in which the Council gathers information about datasets with observations of multiple species. A report on these datasets will be included in the 2017 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports. When the Council has made its final decision on what species are in need of conservation and management, the research and information review can continue for species-specific information. At the same time, data gaps uncovered from the larger agency datasets can be considered for the Council's 5 Year Research Priorities, which expire in 2019.

Walker described the available EFH data discovered to date, including the results of a survey of REAC agencies. The National Marine Sanctuary, CRAG/DMWR, NPS, and NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) may collect information. USFWS performs survey at Rose Atoll. NOAA's State of the Reef report from 2008 included an inventory of datasets through 2007, which will be updated through this effort. Other nearshore sources of information collected recently include the PIFSC Coral Reef Ecosystem Program fish surveys, larval tows recently added to their reef monitoring protocol, and some opportunistic drop camera work performed by Marlowe Sabater. Datasets in the deeper waters include video archives of the Hawaii Undersea Research Lab and Okeanos Explorer submersible or remotely operated vehicle dives, as well as research fishing and midwater trawls conducted by researchers aboard the NOAA vessel which visited American Samoa in 2016.

Peck said that the USFWS conducts fish and benthic surveys within the lagoon at Rose Atoll, following a standardized sampling protocol beginning a year and a half ago.

Bordelon said the Marine Division of NPS performs transect monitoring for species diversity and species count in the National Park of American Samoa, on the north coast of Tutuila and at Tulaga Reef of Ofu. Research at Ofu focuses on temperature and crown of thorns starfish (COTS) abatement. COTS numbers are higher on Tutuila than on Ofu, but treatment has been successful. Stanford and Old Dominion have partnered with NPS to perform long term monitoring at Ofu.

Ochavillo said the Key Reef Species Program and Territorial Monitoring Program of DMWR perform fish and habitat surveys, but that in water work was halted between 2012 and 2017 while the USFWS funding was held until the environmental compliance documents were completed.

c. Review of Non-Fishing Impacts to EFH

Walker presented on a report by Dwayne Minton which reviewed the effects of non-fishing activities on fish habitat, which the Council asked staff to scope through its advisory bodies in June of 2016. The report describes the ecosystems contained within EFH; seven additional non-fishing impacts; the stressors associated with the non-fishing activities; the effect of each of the stressors on each of the ecosystems within EFH; conservation and enhancement recommendations; and provides guidance on assessing cumulative impacts on EFH. The description of the ecosystems is important given the Council's requirement to include preferred habitat characteristics within the EFH designations for managed species. EFH designations with habitat characteristics do not include a description of those characteristics, and the ecological function of these smaller scale ecosystems may vary between FEP management areas.

Peck said that sand and coral mining and seawall construction, sometimes associated with coastal road development, were missing as identified activities. The committee discussed sand mining, noting that the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) requires permits for sand mining while DMWR only has jurisdiction over sand mining which occurs in marine protected areas. DPR does not enforce sand mining permits and is generally focused on parks. Other resource agencies have concerns with sand and rock mining practices and DPR does not have enforcement capabilities. Sand mining in combination with sea level rise, and its impacts on turtle habitat and the coral reef ecosystem were identified as concerns. Outreach is a primary concern, because people do not know that they need a permit to mine sand, and it was noted that taking bags of sand and rocks is a culturally important practice.

King noted that the report should include discharging ballast water. Algae blooms, microplastics, and effluent from upland aquaculture were noted as concerns. The chair noted that the American Samoa Environmental Protection agency is developing regulations for pollution, but no representatives were present today.

The committee discussed effective best management practices. NPS considers collaboration with local communities the most effective strategy in reducing marine debris in the park, over issuing citations. Outreach and public campaigns are an important component as well.

Raynal said that there is a gap in communication between governments and villages, and there are several large international non-government organizations which specialize in developing strategies to bridge that gap. This is a need in American Samoa and is a key factor in successful outreach.

King said that it is difficult to enforce best management practices for bilge water, and visiting yachts usually wait for high tide and discharge the wastewater to avoid reanchoring. Ballast water is a concern for invasive species. The chair said that USCG voluntary inspections are effective in addressing environmental issues as well as safety issues.

Vaofanua said that education is their primary best management practice, and that DMWR focuses on explaining how everyday practices affect fisheries and the ecosystem. Targeting the younger generation has been most effective.

Peck said that fish aggregating devices (FADs) should be assessed as a fishing effect for the permitted programs and moored FADs and as a marine debris issue for lost FADs. The report should include impact information on FADs that wash up on shore. Raynal said shipwrecks are a concern for the coral reef and pelagic ecosystems.

Sword asked if there was a way to exempt docks and harbors from EFH, because the organisms growing on existing structures slows down the permitting process. Walker said that the Council brought up this issue in March. The reason EFH is interpreted to include structures is because the Council's definitions include all substrate as EFH, despite the fact that artificial structures are not discussed as preferred habitat for any managed fish species. Including habitat characteristics within the designations clarifies the designations. Raynal said the cannery docks act as a habitat for endangered species.

3. Action Items for the American Samoa FEP

a. Aquaculture Management

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, presented on the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) on Aquaculture Management in the Western Pacific. He provided a background on the action and presented options that the Council may choose a preliminary preferred option at its 171st meeting. The Council developed a policy on aquaculture in 2007, followed by an amendment to allow for permitting and reporting of aquaculture operations with final action in 2012. The PEIS includes alternatives for no action, a less restrictive alternative, and a more restrictive alternative. Each alternative includes 11 program components. The PEIS includes an environmental analysis of each alternative for each program component. DeMello noted that the draft PEIS will be published at the end of the year.

The committee discussed the PEIS. DeMello clarified that the PEIS does not include land-based aquaculture and only focuses on aquaculture in the EEZ. American Samoa DMWR has a simple permit structure in place but does not consider the larger net pens or tuna farming. Committee members recognized that there have been mangrove crab and snail aquaculture in the nearshore ocean and mangrove area, but that no interest exists for offshore aquaculture. The committee offered that genetics and escapement are of concern. There was some concern that American Samoa's government may not protect the investment of a new aquaculture industry and would not attract investment. Developing an aquaculture regulatory program puts safeguards in place for the environment and also communicates what the government would need from industry and

what industry can expect from the government. The committee was concerned that the local agency would need a lot of education in order to develop a similar program consistent with offshore regulation, but recognized the potential of offshore aquaculture for income and to reduce the seafood trade deficit.

DeMello said that framework procedures included in the options is a way to tweak regulations based on local needs, and that the Council will consider options for different components of the aquaculture program this meeting. Committee members stressed the importance of finding out the direction that the administration and communities want to go before proceeding. Brown said collaboration between the federal government and ASG and stakeholders is very important for decision-making around aquaculture management and said the draft PEIS provides an additional opportunity for public comment.

The chair concluded by saying that while we can regulate as much as possible, like with sand mining, we must have collaboration and outreach. Involvement of the local government is important and necessary to get the message to the community at large to improve our situation and reduce impacts on our environment. Aquaculture is a work in progress and everyone's input is important in this process.

b. Gold Coral Moratorium

DeMello presented options for gold coral management in the Western Pacific region. Gold coral may not occur in the management area of the American Samoa FEP, but the moratorium on harvest applies throughout the region. The moratorium is based on the extremely slow growth rate of gold corals. The current moratorium expires in 2018 and the Council will decide whether to extend the moratorium, allow it to lapse, or permanently prohibit the harvest of gold corals. If the moratorium were to lapse, the Council would need to specify an ACL for the fishery. Currently the moratorium negates the need for an ACL. Staff provided a background on the initial moratorium as well as preliminary re-calculations of maximum sustainable yield (MSY), noting the recalculations of MSY based on the new aging estimates would result in low quotas.

The committee offered that the amount that could be harvested on such a long-lived species is small, and the harvest cost outweighs the value of the fishery. They noted that option 2 allows some flexibility for harvest. There was discussion of potentially adding a fourth option, for studying the susceptibility to harvest. Staff clarified that this type of research can occur within the regulatory beds. The range of the species is another consideration, but it is data limited.

There was support for a very conservative option. Staff clarified that the second option allows for time to set the annual catch limit to zero for the foreseeable future or change it to something more appropriate.

In response to a concern for poaching, staff clarified that the beds are restricted and submersibles are required. Poaching is likely not an issue. The issue is before the Council because the regulation will expire, not because there was a request from industry to reopen the fishery. All

committee members were in agreement for a conservative approach, but some were more in favor extending the moratorium over an immediate ban.

In response to a question about whether the gold coral provides habitat for other species, Walker responded that the ecological role of these organisms are not well understood but fish have been observed within precious coral beds. Raynal said the value of precious coral as habitat may exceed the value of the precious coral fishery.

4. Public Comment

Carlos Sanchez, a REAC member, commented that he believes in the power of mother nature, and there is not much we can do to influence natural processes.

5. Other Business

There was no other business. REAC members participated in a climate change training workshop.

6. REAC Discussion and Recommendations

The REAC made the following recommendations.

The REAC recommends the Council requests that ASG consider which department should have permitting and enforcement authority for sand mining regulations, provide outreach and review the regulations to ensure they are in line with other natural resource management programs.

The REAC recommends that the Council continue developing management regulations and engaging stakeholders on the aquaculture options to determine the best option for the American Samoa community and government.

The REAC recommends a conservative approach on precious coral management given the slow growth rate, low value of the fishery, and potential ecosystem services offered by the gold coral community.

The REAC recommends that the Council encourage ASG to build capacity to collaborate between local and federal government; local, regional and international non-governmental organizations, and communities in ongoing natural resource management and education/outreach efforts.