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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Pacific Islands Regional Office
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February 10, 2020

Va'amua Henry Seseapasara
Director
AS Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources
MWR Building, Fagatoto
Pago Pago, AS 96799

Dear Henry,

In August 2019, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) completed a benchmark stock assessment for the bottomfish fisheries of American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The assessment results indicated the bottomfish fishery of American Samoa is subject to overfishing and is overfished, based on the stock status determination criteria specified in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan for American Samoa. The assessment information also indicated the long-term maximum sustainable yield (MSY) in the fishery is 28,800 lb. However, the overfishing probability projections for 2020 through 2025 indicated that the level of catch associated with a 50 percent probability of overfishing in each calendar year was just 8,000 lb. This is because the current level of biomass is substantially lower than the biomass needed to produce MSY. Therefore, to end overfishing in the fishery, the 2019 assessment projection results indicate total catch of American Samoa bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) must be limited to no more than 8,000 lb in each calendar year. For comparison, from 2013 through 2017, the annual average catch was 21,139 lb.

In response to the assessment results, the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), at its 180th meeting held in American Samoa in October 2019, requested that NMFS implement interim measures to reduce overfishing, consistent with provisions of Section 304(e)(6) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The Council noted that immediately ending overfishing would be expected to result in severe economic and cultural impacts to the communities that rely on bottomfish for commercial, subsistence, religious and cultural purposes. Therefore, the Council requested that such an interim measure include implementation of a catch limit at a level that reduces overfishing, while increasing biomass through the duration of the interim measure. PIFSC estimates the maximum level of catch that would allow biomass to increase in calendar year 2020 is 13,000 lb. PIFSC projections indicate that catch levels greater than 13,000 lb would result in decreased biomass.

Section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act allows the Secretary of Commerce to issue interim measures that are necessary to address overfishing, when requested by a Council. Such measures may remain in effect for no more than 180 days. However, an interim measure may be extended for one additional period of no more than 186 days, provided the public has had the opportunity to comment on the interim measure, and the Council is actively preparing a measures to address the overfishing on a permanent basis.



NMFS is currently developing a rule package to implement an interim measure to limit catch of American Samoa BMUS to 13,000 lb. To ensure that the proposed interim measure is effective in reducing overfishing during the interim period, we are requesting the assistance of the American Samoa Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources (DMWR) in fast-tracking bottomfish data reporting. Specifically, we need accurate total catch estimates of BMUS on a monthly basis. This will allow us to track catches of BMUS relative to the 13,000 lb limit. When NMFS forecasts that the limit would be reached, we would prohibit fishing for and retention of BMUS in the Federal waters around American Samoa.

A Federal fishery closure alone, however, will not be effective in reducing overfishing. This is because a substantial amount of BMUS are caught in nearshore waters, which would be unaffected by a Federal closure. Accordingly, we also request DMWR to consider implementing measures that would allow you to prohibit fishing for, and retention of, BMUS in nearshore waters during any closure of Federal waters. Together, complementary Federal and local measures would prevent the fishery from exceeding the 13,000 lb limit and achieve the goal of reducing overfishing.

We understand the challenges of moving to fast-tracking bottomfish catch, and of establishing a measure that would close local nearshore waters to bottomfish fishing. Nonetheless, your assistance is essential to address overfishing in the fishery, and we stand ready to assist with these efforts. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Brett Schumacher at 808-725-5185 or brett.schumacher@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Tosatto
Regional Administrator

cc: Michael Seki – PIFSC
Kitty Simonds – WPFMC