



183rd Meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

September 15 - 17, 2020

Via WebEx Conferencing and

Department of Port Administration Airport Conference Room

Tafuna Village, American Samoa

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1. COVID-19 Impacts

There have still been zero cases of COVID-19 confirmed in American Samoa. This prompted the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to revise the travel risk notice for the territory from high to low risk. CDC still lists neighboring independent Samoa as “unknown” due to a lack of data available. The Governor of American Samoa has extended the Code Blue Emergency Declaration for the territory through September 30, 2020. The government has decided to stay on high alert despite the fact that there have been no cases locally. This is mainly due to concerns of rising cases in Hawaii and the territory’s limited healthcare capacity in the event that cases were to appear in American Samoa, as well as evidence that Pacific Island people have a high susceptibility to the virus.

Under this declaration, all flights from Hawaii are to remain suspended and flights between American Samoa and independent Samoa are also suspended. The government is currently reviewing the possibility of repatriation flights for those residents who are stuck off island to return home, although a decision has yet to be finalized. The Governor also asked local healthcare officials to explore ways to repatriate the 300 to 400 residents stranded off island and to carry out exercises to prepare for such a scenario. The US military and Coast Guard as well as medical evacuation flights have been granted exemptions.

StarKist continues to operate on a normal schedule as the government has granted the company a waiver from the 5:00 AM to 9:00 PM restrictions placed on local businesses. This waiver was granted due to the company’s vital role in both the local economy and the U.S. food supply chain. Buses providing transportation to the company’s workforce (over 2,000 employees) have also been granted waivers from the restriction on public transportation which currently allows service only between the hours of 5:00 AM and 9:00 PM.

Dozens of captains and crew from purse seine tuna fishing boats have been stranded in American Samoa since the flights were suspended back in March. Most are based out of San Diego and have been restricted to staying on their boats for nearly 6 months. The purse seine fishing boats that deliver to the cannery in American Samoa have been severely hindered by the lack of flights, unable to bring crew in or get crew out of the territory. Similarly, the local

longline fleet is experiencing difficulties in filling crews as well and have attributed that to the flight restrictions.

2. Cannery Update

Cannery production continues uninterrupted throughout the pandemic period. Production has increased to meet demands which, in turn, have resulted in employment increase as well. Flight restrictions to the island have hindered progress to complete planned projects for the year. Professional services that can only be found off island are not able to travel to the island to complete these services. In addition, newly recruited professional skilled workers overseas are not able to travel due to extensive flight cancellations and/or restrictions.

Fish supply to the cannery has been steady in the past few months. The Governor's Emergency Declaration and the Department of Health (DOH) Seaport Policy allow for screening of all incoming ocean vessels before they berth. The fishing fleet, foreign and domestic, is subject to the same screening protocols. Before any fishing vessel is allowed to dock at the cannery, DOH is required to provide notice to the facility that the vessel / crew are cleared for unloading operations.

3. Longline Fuel Subsidy and Diversification Projects

The longline fishery on the other hand has continued to fish during the Code Blue declaration. Despite the fleet's own challenges without flights which they rely on for crew as well as shipping in supplies and equipment, they have continued to fish. The fleet was also assisted recently by Sustainable Fisheries Funds (SFF) that provided a fuel subsidy for those longline fishing vessels with U.S. longline limited entry permits. Through the project, vessels submitted trip verification forms to the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) to verify trip and fuel purchase information and received a fuel subsidy of up to \$5,000 per trip. The program was valid from January 1 through August 30, 2020.

Another SFF project that is being implemented will assist those American Samoa longline vessels in diversifying their operations. The Tautai O Samoa Longline and Fishing Association has submitted a proposal for SFF funds to outfit vessels in the fleet to do pelagic trolling. The fleet plans to have those boats jig for albacore in southern waters during the months they are normally tied up. The Council and the association have been working with DMWR and NOAA NMFS on the project details. This project could provide more fishing opportunities to the fleet which would result in more longline fish delivered to the cannery. The fish delivered by the American Samoa longline fleet is important to the company as it is necessary to fulfill contracts to the U.S. Military and School Lunch Program.

4. Island Fisheries Update

Fishing tournaments have been cancelled or postponed for American Samoa in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two major tournaments each year are the Steinlager I'a Lapo'a Game Fishing Tournament which takes place around the first week of May and is sponsored by the Pago Pago Game Fishing Association and the Fagota Mo Taea Fishing Tournament which is sponsored by the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa. Both tournaments have been canceled due to the Coronavirus pandemic. There are also no plans for the alia fishing associations on Tutuila or Manu'a to hold any tournaments this year. This is primarily because so few alia have been operational, with up to one dozen currently dry-docked for repairs. The owners have alleged that the damages were due to previous repair and renovation by the American Samoa Shipyard Authority – mainly because improper paint was used on the aluminum hulls which caused holes to form. Five alia owners have filed a lawsuit claiming the repair work caused damage.

The two alia owners who have U.S. longline permits have reported that they have reported an abundance of albacore and yellowfin tuna recently. Alia trollers have seen an uptick in larger sized skipjack (gaogo) and have also landed plenty of yellowfin tuna. Recent rough seas have reduced bottomfish fishing effort in the territory in the months of July and August. The vessels that have reported bottomfish fishing trips have targeted shallower species in the range of 300 to 500 feet depths.