



**Interviews with Fishery Participants, Suppliers, and Purchasers Regarding the Economic
Collapse of the American Samoa Longline Fishery
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1. Background

In addition to the historical cultural importance of fishing in the Samoan Islands, American Samoa (AS) is a regional player in international tuna processing, due largely to the fact that fish caught on foreign vessels and landed in Pago Pago are exempted from U.S. import duties. The first cannery opened in 1954 and commercial pelagic fishing has been an important industry since. When both Starkist and Samoa Packing operations were in operation, canning contributed approximately \$25 million in wages and about \$40 million in fuel, electricity and other services to the local economy.

American Samoa's pelagic fishery can be divided into three vessel types: purse seine, local aluminum catamaran style (*alia*), and steel mono-hull longline. Last year, longline vessels based in American Samoa recorded their lowest annual catch numbers in the past decade. In 2002, the catch rate across the AS longline fleet was about 6,000 mt (more than 300,000 fish). However, catches have declined since 2007. The catch rate has declined by 40% on average, and the 2013 catch rate is a record low and 70% less than the highest catch rate, recorded in 1996. In 2013 only 2000 mt (~117,000 fish) were landed and 2014 is likely to be even worse. In short, the longline fishery has collapsed.

Between February 7th -10th, Council staff traveled to American Samoa for meetings with government staff, fishermen, and cannery representatives. The purpose of these meetings was to provide a regional perspective on the status of longline fishing and the South Pacific albacore stock, hear fishermen's concerns first-hand, and to discuss regulatory and policy options that might be available to the Council and the Territory in response to the current situation. Though regulatory action is unlikely to result in immediate relief for the AS longline fishery, and regulatory actions typically take 1-2 years to be fully reviewed and implemented, there may be some steps available to policy makers to provide some limited assistance to the fishery.

Following these meetings, the Council’s Social Scientist remained in American Samoa to meet individually with fishermen, government staff, fishery-associated businessmen, and Council advisory panel members. These meeting were meant to serve the policy development process and to provide information for further study of the social and economic connections between the Territory and the longline component of the pelagic fishery. This report describes the themes that emerged from these interviews and recommends follow-up actions.

2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with thirteen individuals across several categories (Table 1). They were conducted at the place and time convenient to the interviewee and each meeting lasted approximately one hour.

Table1. Type and number/type of interviewee.

Category*	Number of Respondents
Fishermen	6
Vessel owner	2
Vessel agent	1
Fleet provisioning/services	3
Fish purchasers	2
Government	2

*Numbers do not sum to 13 because in several instances an individual could be placed into more than one category.

These meetings were non-structured and followed only a general outline. The goal was to stimulate discussion about the relative importance of the American Samoa-based longline vessels to the Territory’s economy and social fabric. After describing the reason for the meeting, the common first question was “Why should anyone care if American Samoa’s longline fleet disappears?” The point of this blunt question was to orient the interviewee towards thinking about and articulating his attitudes and perceptions of the local contributions, if any, of the AS longline fishery.

From there, the interview was free-flowing. Several interviews were similar in the questions and responses, while others varied widely.

3. Findings

Several themes emerged from the interviews. Perhaps most interesting was while most respondents believe moderately or strongly that local longliners are important to the Territory and do not want them to leave (this was true even for other fishermen who feel that longliners fishing in the AS EEZ deplete the amount of fish available for them to catch), they could only offer the most general of evidence for their opinion. Besides a belief that AS longliners provide a better product than foreign longliners to the local stores, restaurants and the canneries, about the most concrete statement people could make was that since the pelagic fishery is so important to AS (because of the Territory's limited economic base), any component of that fishery must be preserved. Canning operations have spin-off benefits to the local economy. For example, the volume of fuel and amount of electricity that the canneries use helps to lower local utility bills for everyone and the fact that shipping containers leave Pago Pago Harbor full (with canned fish) rather than empty helps keep shipping costs to the island lower than they would otherwise be.

A representative of the AS Department of Commerce stated unequivocally that the Territory does not have data on the relative impact to the Territory from just the longliners. A member of the Territorial Legislature (*Fono*) suggested that having a good picture of the local contribution of the longliners AS would help the Fono make decisions about how much and what kinds of assistance to provide to the industry, as it has recently done with the alia-based bottomfish fishery.

A second theme that emerged from the interviews was those who feel the longliners contribute to the Territory do not feel they contribute in a major way. Cited were: local sourcing of bait, fuel, ice, and food, as well as crew expenditures while they are shoreside. Additionally, one respondent voiced sincere concern for the families of local crew members. In some cases, he stated, these individuals are the only breadwinners for the family. However, most respondents seemed to assume these are comparatively small expenditures since there are only about 16 active vessels and the canneries would remain open since they source much fish from purse seiners and foreign longliners.

Several respondents mentioned that although foreign-sourced pelagic fish could conceivably replace that from AS longliners in stores, restaurants, and markets, they had a sense of pride in fish landed by local boats. At least two people mentioned that because of the regulations that AS longliners must operate under, they believe the catch to be harvested more safely and sustainably than foreign caught fish. One cannery representative also indicated he believes these fish are better handled before being landed at the cannery. This perspective, coupled with several comments about a perceived upswing in local desire for fresh fish options, suggests that local longliners are an important, but perhaps not universally-recognized, component of Territory's seafood supply.

Most longline fishermen and several people associated with the longline fishery voiced support for modifying the current longline prohibited area around the islands (this is not true for other types of fishermen). There seemed to be a general understanding that there is unlikely to be large reserves of albacore in those areas, but many felt that opening up more area to fish might allow the boats greater flexibility to pursue migrating stocks and provide some financial relief as boats won't have to go as far out to sea to start fishing. All longline fishermen that were interviewed stated they do not remember a time that was this financially challenging to longline, and were looking at any options for relief.

Finally, a perception echoed by several interviewees was that both the American Samoa Government (ASG) and the longline fishermen have not been strategic about the fishery. On the government side, they feel ASG has put no effort into planning the relationship between pelagic fishing vessels and the Territory. There is no data on territorial contributions from the different types of pelagic fishing, no understanding of what the longline and other fishing operations need and a development plan put in place to provide for those needs, and no government fishery development officer (since most of the AS Department of Marine and Wildlife Resource's efforts are funded by conservation dollars). There is also no local central distribution of fish or control of seafood safety.

On the fisheries side several respondents, including fishermen, spoke of the need to fish smarter and better utilize and process incidentally-caught fish (others tunas and pelagics) more effectively. These interviewees felt current operations are wasteful and inefficient. There are species of tuna and other species that could be more effectively processed and used.

4. Recommendations

Following are considerations for the Council that may assist the development and operation of the longline component of American Samoa's pelagic fishery, based on the interviews conducted.

1. Since many interviewees, including at least one member of the legislature, do not understand the specific connections between AS-based longliners and the Territory, and since ASG is unlikely to commission such research in the near future, the Council should consider identifying funding for such a study.
2. The upswing in local desire for fresh fish options, combined with limited public awareness of the local longline vessels— their operation, ownership, and the products they harvest, suggests the Council, via its Island Coordinator, should develop public awareness products. Most lay people do not understand the various components of the fishery or where the pelagic fish at stores and restaurants come from.

3. The Council should partner with ASG to address the lack of local planning and understanding of the fisheries needs and how government can facilitate meeting those needs.
4. Related to above, the Council should investigate, with DMWR, the mechanics of installing a local ASG fishery development officer to work on longline and other local fishery development issues (e.g., bottomfish, markets, distribution, etc.).
5. The Council should consider public health and safety in the seafood handling chain by instructing Council staff to meet with PIRO's Seafood Safety staffer to discuss trainings (with fishermen, grocers, market and restaurants) and inspections.