



Federal Fishery Managers Amend American Samoa Large Vessel Prohibited Area to Promote Optimal Yield, Efficiency and Non-Discrimination in the Local Albacore Fishery

HONOLULU (20 March 2015) The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, at the conclusion of its three-day meeting in Honolulu on Wednesday, recommended an amendment to the American Samoa Large Vessel Prohibited Area (LVPA) regulations. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the measure would allow federally permitted American Samoa longline vessels greater than 50 feet in length overall to operate in waters seaward of 12 nautical miles (nm) around the islands of Tutuila, Manua`a and Swains. Currently, the LVPA restricts longline and other vessels of this size to waters seaward of 50 nm from shore around these islands. The measure would continue to exclude the larger vessels from operating 0 to 12 miles from shore and would include an annual review by the Council at which time the LVPA measure could be further amended.

The LVPA was created in 2002 when about 40 alia longline vessels of less than 50 feet length overall were operating in American Samoa. The purpose of creating the LVPA was to mitigate potential user conflict between the small and larger vessels. Today, only one small alia longline vessel is operating in the Territory. While the South Pacific albacore tuna stock is assessed as healthy (not overfished), lower catch rates have negatively affected longline fleets throughout the South Pacific region, including American Samoa's fleet of larger longline vessels, which provide fish to the tuna canneries in Pago Pago.

Explaining his decision to support the LVPA exemption, Council Chair Ed Ebisui Jr. said that the National Standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require management measures to strive for optimal yield to promote fishing efficiency and also to not discriminate among fisheries. Reducing the LVPA from its current 50 nm limit to 12 nm would reduce operational costs of the longline vessels and allow the American Samoa longline fleet to continue to provide an important domestic source of albacore to local canneries, while still protecting important areas for other coastal resource users, including troll and recreational fisheries.

Council Members Claire Poumele, director of the American Samoa Port Authority, and Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, director of the American Samoa Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources, voted against the measure. They noted that the residents of American Samoa are divided on the issue. American Samoa Gov. Lolo Matalasi Moliga had asked the Council in a letter received on March 13, 2015, to delay the vote for three months and also cited concerns over federal policy interfering with the protection of American Samoa's fishing resources. During the meeting it was noted that American Samoa management jurisdiction extends from 0 to 3 miles from shore and the longline fishery operates in federal waters, seaward of local jurisdiction.

Regarding Gov. Lolo's request to delay the vote, Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds said that the Council has postponed voting on the LVPA measure twice. In June 2014, it did so at the request of the Governor, and, in October 2014, it did so to give American Samoa residents more time to learn about the issue. Council staff subsequently held informational meetings in American Samoa on the proposal.

The Council has undertaken numerous efforts since the 1990s to promote the smaller troll, recreational and alia vessels in American Samoa, Simonds notes. The Council has supported extensive fisheries development projects in Tutuila and the Manua`a islands including boat ramps, ice plants, fishermen cooperatives, a fish market, safety equipment, trainings, loan programs and more. The Council hopes that these recent fisheries development initiatives will be effective in reviving the American Samoa fleet of smaller vessels. Additionally, the Council helped the local government apply for federal fisheries disaster relief to repair alia vessels damaged during the 2009 tsunami. There are hopes that the American Samoa government will efficiently use the funds so the fleet of alia and other small vessels that have not been operating return to fishing.

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Other regulatory recommendations made by the Council Wednesday included the following:

- Specification of an annual longline albacore catch limit of 5,425 metric ton (mt) within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around American Samoa for 2015 and 2016.
- Set a 2,000 mt bigeye tuna allocation each for American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and to allow each of these Territories to enter into agreement to transfer up to 1,000 mt to US vessels permitted under the Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan in support of fisheries development in the Territories.

In making the latter recommendation, the Council considered management measures for bigeye tuna in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) developed by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), an international regional fishery management organization to which the United States is a member. Under the WCPFC, the US Territories are grouped with Small Island Developing States and do not have a bigeye longline quota while the United States has a limit, which is caught in its entirety by Hawai`i longline vessels. The 2015 US limit for bigeye tuna is 3,554 mt, which is about 75 percent of the fleet's 2004 bigeye catch. The US quota will take an additional 5 percent reduction in 2017 to 3,345 mt. Together the Hawai`i and combined US Territorial catches account for approximately 3 percent of the WCPO bigeye tuna catches. The Council also considered that, while the WCPO longline fisheries have significantly reduced their targeted bigeye catch, the purse-seine fisheries' incidental take of bigeye tuna continues to increase with their bigeye catch reaching record high levels in 2013.

For more on the Council actions, email info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov or phone (808) 522-8220. The Council was established by Congress under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976 to manage domestic fisheries operating seaward of State waters around Hawai`i, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the US Pacific Island Remote Island Areas. Recommendations by the Council are transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for final approval.

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council: Appointees by the Secretary of Commerce from nominees selected by American Samoa, CNMI, Guam and Hawai`i governors: Michael Duenas, Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association (Guam) (vice chair); Edwin Ebisui (Hawai`i) (chair); Michael Goto, United Fishing Agency Ltd. (Hawai`i); John Gourley, Micronesian Environmental Services (CNMI) (vice chair); Julie Leialoha, biologist (Hawai`i); Dr. Claire Tuia Poumele, Port Administration (American Samoa); McGrew Rice, commercial and charter fisherman (Hawai`i) (vice chair); and William Sword, recreational fisherman (American Samoa) (vice chair). Designated state officials: Carty Chang, Hawai`i Department of Land and Natural Resources; Dr. Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources; Richard Seman, CNMI Department of Lands and Natural Resources; and Mariquita Taitague, Guam Department of Agriculture. Designated federal officials: Matthew Brown, USFWS Pacific Islands Refuges and Monuments Office; David Hogan, US Department of State; RAdm Cari B. Thomas, US Coast Guard 14th District; and Michael Tosatto, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office.

The proposed amendment to the Large Vessel Prohibited Area measure would allow this US-flagged American Samoa longline vessel and other local US longline vessels that are greater than 50 feet in length overall to fish seaward of 12 nm around Tutuila, Manu`a and Swains islands.

