

Territorial Fisheries Staff Issues and Needs: An Exploratory Survey

September 2014



Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813

A report of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1400, Honolulu, HI 96813

Prepared by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

© Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council 2014.
All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

ISBN 978-1-937863-55-5

CONTENTS

Summary	v
1 Introduction	1
2 Respondents	2
3 Staffing	2
4 Staff Education	3
5 Staff Recruitment	3
6 Training Opportunities and Needs	5
7 Partnering on Internships	5
8 Conclusions	6

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Perceptions of staff capacity	5
Figure 2 Difficulties recruiting local staff with fisheries education	6

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the ten individuals who took the time to respond to our questions. We also thank those who provided clarifying information via email and telephone.

SUMMARY

This document reports the results of a small survey the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Council) conducted in July and August 2014. The purpose of the survey was to provide the Council and Federal partners with some basic information that could be used to guide its efforts to assist the American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR), the CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Guam's Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources (DAWR). We targeted directors and leadership staff in this survey.

- Staffing – While many believed that their agency has the right number of people for the scope of its work, nearly a quarter indicated that their agency has too few fisheries staff.
- Most respondents reported difficulty in recruiting both locals and off-islanders that have fisheries education.
- When it comes to local vs. off-island hires for skilled fisheries staff positions, two clear preferences were noted 50 percent of respondents prefer to hire all local staff if qualified for the job, while 38 percent preferred to hire a mix of local and off-island staff.
- Formal education – In some agencies, a four year degree is the norm, while one respondent stated that a majority of fisheries staff in his or her agency have no degree. Still a few more indicated that some have four- and some have two-year degrees.
- It appears a fisheries degree is more the exception than the norm.
- A majority of respondents said they would much or always prefer their fisheries staff to have a fisheries degree.
- Most respondents stated that their off-island contract staff stay for at least two contracts and that 75 percent of respondents said that their local hires stay for longer than six years. Almost all indicated support for additional staff training and many suggested specific needs, including college degrees.
- Strong support was expressed for hosting and mentoring Council-funded interns.

The report concludes with a few potential activities that, based on the data, could help to address some of the local agencies' staff and capacity needs.

1 INTRODUCTION

During July and August 2014, the Council undertook a small survey of leadership staff in the territorial agencies (American Samoa DMWR, CNMI DFW and Guam DAWR). The purpose of this survey was to inform current and future Council efforts to assist these agencies with their ongoing fishery conservation and management activities. The Council has long supported projects that build local capacity to collect, store, analyze and use fishery and other marine ecosystem information.

The results of the survey provide a quick and basic portrait of the agencies' fisheries staff and needs. The data are often averaged in this report, since in this first effort we sought to generally understand the environment across the three agencies and to determine which themes we might

need to explore further.

2 RESPONDENTS

Ten individuals completed the survey, three from American Samoa, six from the CNMI and one from Guam. Of these, two were department directors, two were fisheries division heads, three were program supervisors, one was a fisheries project leader and two were fisheries biologists. Their tenure in the agency was as follows:

- Six have been employed by their respective agencies for five or less years;
- Two have been with their agencies for more than five but less than ten years; and
- Three have been with their agency for more than 10 years.

The minimum tenure was two years and the maximum was 20 years.

3 STAFFING

The American Samoa DMWR has approximately 17 staff who work directly on fisheries issues. The CNMI DFW has about seven staff who work directly in fisheries and an additional six individuals who work on fisheries or fisheries-related issues, such as data. Guam's DAWR employees eight people who work in the biological and technical aspects of fisheries.

A majority of respondents indicated that that their agency has the right number of people for the scope of its work. However, nearly a quarter believed that their agency has too few fisheries staff, with one of those respondents stating they have been severely understaffed for years. Only one person responded that there are too many staff members in their agency for the fisheries work at hand.

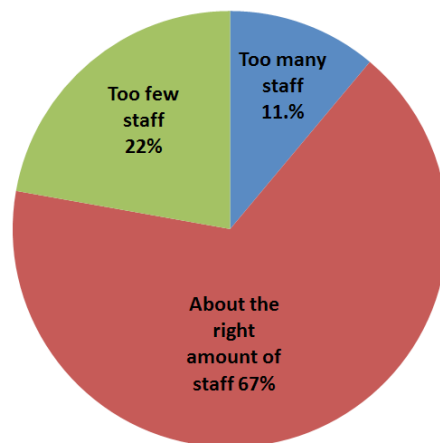


Figure 1 Perceptions of staff capacity.

On average across the three agencies, the breakdown of fisheries staff was as follows: approximately 35 percent could be classified as scientists or researchers, just over 50 percent as data entry personnel, about 50 percent work on policy and management issues and about 20 percent in outreach and education. The fact that the numbers sum to more than 100 percent

indicates that some fisheries staff members have dual functions – not an uncommon occurrence in small local agencies such as these.

4 STAFF EDUCATION

When asked about formal education, responses varied across the three agencies. Several respondents stated that all fisheries staff have at least a four year degree and some have graduate degrees. However, another respondent said that a majority of fisheries staff in his or her agency have no degree. Still, a few more indicated that some have four- and some have two-year degrees. Clearly, each of the three agencies has differing amounts of formally-educated staff but more investigation is needed to understand these differences by individual agency.

It appears from the data that a fisheries degree is more the exception than the norm, though a majority of respondents said they would much or always prefer their fisheries staff to have a fisheries degree. Interestingly, two people only somewhat prefer this and one respondent indicated that he or she did not prefer it. We also asked whether any current staff members had left the agency to pursue a more advanced degree and subsequently returned to work there. Several people answered yes; one or two current staff had done so. The majority of respondents, however, said that none had done so.

5 STAFF RECRUITMENT

In addition to questions about education, we also asked about the composition of the fisheries staff to get a sense of local vs. off-island recruiting needs and preferences. We first asked if any of the current fisheries staff were people who had come to the island and had, over time, become locals. This appears to describe very few of the agencies' fisheries staff. More staff members who are off-islanders are not considered "locals" just yet.

Most respondents reported difficulty in recruiting locals that have fisheries education (Figure 2). Colleges in the US Pacific Islands lack fisheries science programs (indeed, even the University of Hawai'i does not have a fisheries science degree), and sometimes local students who leave the territory to attend college do not return to their home island for a job. Couple this with the fact that relatively few of those studying at off-island institutions enroll in fisheries or marine science programs, and off-island recruiting becomes a necessity.

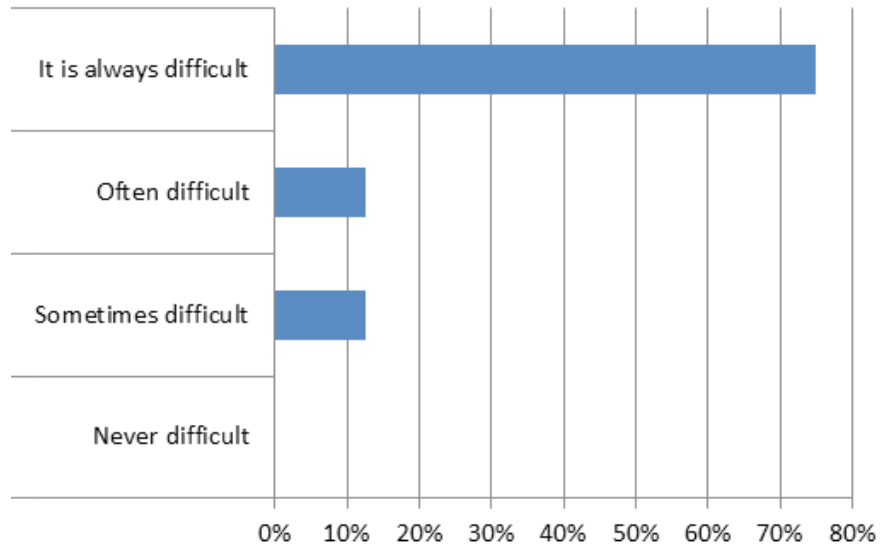


Figure 2 Difficulties recruiting local staff with fisheries education.

However, off-island recruiting is apparently not easy either. A combined 50 percent of respondents indicated that it is often or always difficult to recruit off-islanders that have fisheries-specific education. These findings suggest agencies can have a difficult time filling vacancies with local or off-islander fisheries personnel who are trained in fisheries science and management.

Respondents report that their agencies advertise their fisheries staff vacancies in a variety of media including local media, national and international websites, professional organizations such as the American Fisheries Society and the NOAA Coral List.

Turnover can be problematic for these agencies. Off-island contract staff may be: 1) fresh out of school and looking only to build their resumes and move on, 2) frustrated by the distance separating them from their family and friends, 3) lost in a cultural context markedly different from their norm, 4) affected by the hot and humid climate and/or 5) challenged by any number of other personal difficulties. However, these positions often provide opportunities to participate in diverse and island-wide natural resource and environmental management activities. This can be attractive to those looking to have a greater local presence and impact than in a similar position in say, Florida or California. This may be one reason that most off-island hires stay until at least the end of their second contract, as indicated by a majority of survey respondents.

We also asked about respondents' preference for local vs. off-island hires for skilled fisheries staff positions. Two clear preferences emerged: 50 percent of respondents prefer to hire all local staff, if qualified for the job. However, 38 percent preferred to hire a mix of local and off-island staff. Those who prefer local staff stated that they can make good roles models, understand the culture and island lifestyle, know the fisheries in ways that may take off-islanders years to learn, and that it is simply good to have local capacity. Also, as 75 percent of respondents said that their local hires stay for longer than six years, longevity may also drive preference for local staff. Those who prefer a mix noted that the agency benefits from various skill sets and skill levels, a range of experience, different perspectives, new ideas and fresh energy.

6 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS

Nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated they would definitely like to provide training opportunities to their staff. The remainder said they probably would like to do so. Several people mentioned college degrees (two-year, four-year, and graduate level). Respondents also mentioned an interest in increasing staff skills in the areas of:

- Data collection;
- Fisheries dependent and independent surveys;
- Maritime and seamanship;
- Database and data management;
- Refreshers;
- New and emerging techniques;
- Statistics; and
- GIS capabilities.

Training is an important and complicated issue in the island agencies. This is partly evidenced by the fact that, when asked about training needs, several respondents mentioned assisting staff to attain college degrees. Much of the Federal conservation dollars that come to the local agencies are used for program items, such as staffing, contracting and equipment. Training needs may rank below these other essential items. The cost of travel, either off-island (for the employee), or to the island (for the trainer), is typically high; and off island training that is longer than one or two weeks is often not possible at all.

There are likely some institutional considerations with regard to training, as well. First, typical marine and fisheries divisions are comprised of a number of different programs and subprograms, including underwater research and monitoring, shoreside data collection, marine protected areas management and education. It can be difficult for agency leaders to assess the training needs of all staff against the division's multiple and often evolving resource management missions and then devise a comprehensive strategy to address those needs. These strategic planning exercises, as important as they are, take time and organization away from the department's funded day-to-day tasks. Agencies may also not be particularly keen to advertise to Federal funding sources that some of their training needs are quite basic, since it may be reasonably assumed that staff are hired with the requisite skills to do the job.

7 PARTNERING ON INTERNSHIPS

The Council is developing a comprehensive internship program, one that would over time, include helping to regularly place interns in the local agencies. This is consistent with the Council's longstanding efforts to facilitate projects that build local capacity. Having local ownership of and participation in data collection is the only way to sustainably improve the quality and quantity of fishery information coming from the islands. Interns may play an important role in this.

When agencies offer interested students a pre-career glimpse into the workings of the agency via an internship, these students take away lessons about what skill sets are most needed. They can then use that information to tailor their education. This, as well as familiarity with the agencies' modus operandi, can be of great benefit if the agency is able to hire some or all of these interns when they graduate.

Most respondents indicated they would be interested in Council-funded interns. However, one person commented that poorly-motivated interns decrease the mentor's efficiency. The selection process that will be part of the Council's internship program is intended to address this concern.

8 CONCLUSIONS

This basic and exploratory survey of select departmental or division staff highlights some areas that the Council may assist the territorial agencies in regarding fisheries science and management expertise.

The variety of fisheries training needs, from the general and basic, to the more specialized is interesting.

- It may be worth developing a scope of work and identifying funds for a contractor to conduct a comprehensive training needs assessment with recommendations to address these needs.
- As previously noted, on-island fisheries training tends to be opportunistic and brief, while off-island training is expensive and involves program disruption. However, there are alternatives. For example, the Council, in partnership with others, including the local governments, may consider developing a semester evening fisheries course to be run out of the local colleges. Staff could take all or just the most relevant modules.

The Council is pleased to see local interest in housing and mentoring and looks forward to working with agency leadership as the Council's internship program comes online.

Finally, responses to this survey suggest that staffing is an area that should be further explored. Some people are convinced that staffing levels for some of the fisheries divisions need to be increased. Understanding this issue, including within programs and subprograms, will take more investigation.