

## Interim Bottomfish Measure Addresses Overfishing, Allows American Samoa Fishery to Operate

UTULEI, AMERICAN SAMOA (24 October 2019) Fishermen from Tutuila and Manu'a islands concerned about the future of the Territory's bottomfish fishery attended the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council meeting yesterday and today in Utulei, American Samoa. A recent draft stock assessment by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) indicates that the federally managed bottomfish complex in American Samoa is overfished and experiencing overfishing. It also indicates that the federally managed Guam bottomfish stock complex is overfished but not experiencing overfishing.



*American Samoa Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources delivering fuel to Manu'a islands for use by fishing vessels.*

Brian Langseth, a stock assessment scientist with NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC), presented the 2019 draft assessment to the Council. The different outcome between the 2019 and previous stock assessments, he said, had to do largely with the way the data was filtered. The data is collected by the American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) through creel surveys, in which DMWR staff interview fishermen about their catch and fishing trip. The Council expressed concerns about the robustness of the data from DMWR that was used in the assessment.

During public testimony, fishermen from Manu'a questioned the accuracy of the data used in the model. They said they haven't been surveyed yet even though they fish principally for bottomfish due to cost and low availability of fuel as well as the small sizes of their vessels. Fishermen from Tutuila also questioned the data, noting that the creel surveys don't capture the fishermen who return to port at night. One fisherman estimated that the creel surveys capture only about 5 percent of the catch. The fishermen also said the catch and catch per unit effort (CPUE) are affected by the wind and current conditions, cost of fuel and market demand. One fisherman shared that the boat owner may have only a \$50 to \$100 profit from a trip after fuel, ice and crew expenses. Fishermen noted that fuel costs have been high and the weather has been rough the past six months to a year. They stressed to the Council that the livelihoods of their families and communities depend on the ability for them to continue to fish.

After deliberations the Council voted on a suite of recommendations to address the anticipated stock status determination by NMFS as well as ways to improve the accuracy of future stock assessments. The Council requested that NMFS implement interim measures to reduce overfishing while it develops a rebuilding plan for the stock. The Council noted that the change in the stock status and harvest limits due to the 2019 stock assessment was a "drastic change." The Council also noted that "immediate ending of overfishing is expected to result in a severe economic and cultural impact to the communities that utilize these resources for commercial, subsistence, religious and cultural purposes." The Council requested that the interim measure implements an annual catch limit for 2020 at a level that reduces overfishing while increasing biomass through the duration of the interim measure.

Additionally, the Council approved a 10-step plan to improve fishery data collected in American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Among the steps is a revision of the

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bottomfish complex definition in the American Samoa Archipelago and Mariana Archipelago (Guam and CNMI) Fishery Ecosystem Plans (FEPs). The bottomfish complex in American Samoa includes 11 species of snapper, emperors, groupers and jacks, while the complex in Guam and the CNMI include 13 species. The Council will explore dividing these into deep-water and shallow-water species as well as by their life histories. The Council will review the options at its next meeting in March 2020 and then request that NMFS immediately develop a new benchmark stock assessment for the Territorial bottomfish following final action on this amendment to the FEPs.

For future stock assessments, the Council requested that a data preparation workshop be held prior to any review of the draft stock assessment. The Council also will work with NMFS and the Territory agencies a) to improve fishery-dependent data collection; b) to conduct community outreach to fishermen on the importance of submitting accurate data and the use of electronic self-reporting for the small boat fisheries; and c) on mandatory fishing license and reporting for the Territories. The latter recommendation is based on a five-day workshop in August on current fishery monitoring programs in the US Pacific Island Territories that involved the Council, NMFS, the territorial agencies and fishermen.

Based on Manu'a fishermen requests, the Council will also work to introduce longline fishing to Manu'a. The fishermen said cost and limited availability of fuel inhibits trolling and weather inhibits bottomfishing.

Among other actions, the Council today also recommended the following:

Loggerhead and Leatherback Turtle Interactions in the Hawai'i Longline Fishery: The Council urged that NMFS, on the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) consider all anticipated scientific information in the biological opinion (BiOp). This should include the new model developed by PIFSC that evaluates the impacts of fishery interactions on the North Pacific loggerhead and Western Pacific leatherback sea turtle populations. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee last week endorsed the new model as best scientific information available for evaluating the fisheries' impacts. The results of the model for the shallow-set longline fishery showed no discernable impact of the fishery's interactions on the population trend of loggerhead turtles over the next 100 years. For leatherbacks, it showed a small change in the long-term population trend, indicating that the population impact from the fishery would occur five years earlier at the end of the 100-year period. NMFS scientist noted that the primary impacts on the leatherback population include directed fisheries and nesting predation where the turtles nest in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. The Council urged NMFS to apply the model to the Hawai'i deep-set and American Samoa longline fisheries so that they may be considered in the ongoing consultations. The Council will additionally work with NMFS to evaluate the impact of any management actions for reducing turtle interactions on the economic performance and socioeconomic effects of the shallow-set and deep-set longline fisheries, including consideration of the effect on protected species being transferred to foreign fisheries should the US fishery longline fishery close. It also recommended that NMFS work with the Council to develop only necessary sea turtle protection measures under the ongoing consultations for the Hawai'i deep-set and American Samoa longline fisheries that are appropriate and practicable and ensure the sustainability of the fisheries.

South Pacific Albacore: The Council requested that NMFS compile and evaluate the catches of albacore from Chinese flagged longline vessels operating in the southwest Pacific and compare to the catches and performance of the American Samoa longline fleet. It also requested that NMFS and the United States delegation to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) work with other international delegations to develop a target reference point for South Pacific albacore to include the CPUE of small island developing states (SIDS) and Participating Territories to reach historical levels in addition to a biomass target reference point. The Council also requested that NMFS and the United States delegation to the WCPFC work with other international delegations to develop a) a harvest plan for South Pacific albacore to achieve its target reference points "soonest" and under 20 years and b) an allocation scheme for countries and cooperating members whereas SIDS and Participating Territories are exempt from annual catch reductions to reach the target reference point or that SIDS and Participating Territories can maintain

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catches commensurate with historical optimal levels. The allocation scheme must take into consideration charter arrangements and allocations should be accounted by fishing vessel registry, such that conservation benefits are not undermined.

For more information and the complete recommendations, go to <http://www.wpcouncil.org/public-meetings/> or contact the Council at [info@wpcouncil.org](mailto:info@wpcouncil.org) or at +1 (808) 522-8220.

**Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council:** Secretary of Commerce appointees from American Samoa, CNMI, Guam and Hawai'i governor nominees: Archie Soliai, StarKist (American Samoa) (chair); John Gourley, Micronesian Environmental Services (CNMI vice chair); Michael Duenas, Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association (Guam vice chair); Edwin Watamura, Waialua Boat Club (Hawai'i vice chair); Howard Dunham, American Samoa Alia Fishing Association (American Samoa); Monique Genereux, business owner (Guam); Michael Goto, United Fishing Agency (Hawai'i); McGrew Rice, charter boat captain (CNMI). Designated state officials: Raymond Roberto, CNMI Dept. of Lands and Natural Resources; Suzanne Case, Hawai'i Dept. of Land & Natural Resources; Chelsa Muña-Brecht, Guam Dept. of Agriculture; Henry Sesepasara, American Samoa Dept. of Marine & Wildlife Resources. Federal officials (voting): Michael Tosatto, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office. Federal officials (non-voting): RADM Kevin Lunday, USCG 14<sup>th</sup> District; Michael Brakke, US State Dept.; Brian Peck, USFWS.     # # # # #