



181st Meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

Laniākea YWCA
Honolulu, HI
Phone: (808) 522-8220

AMERICAN SAMOA COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES REPORT

1. AMERICAN SAMOA TUNA INDUSTRY

A news story done by PBS News Hour Weekend highlighted American Samoa's tuna industry and some of the issues surrounding it. A team of journalists from the Public Broadcasting Service came to American Samoa and spoke to a number of people involved in the local fisheries about the state of the tuna industry. The ten-minute piece was aired this past February and has created quite a buzz in the territory, especially regarding the bleak outlook for StarKist Samoa, and the potential impacts American Samoa would face if the company left island.

Lead correspondent Mike Taibbi spoke to a number of people and segments of those interviews were included in the piece. The individuals interviewed include Council Chairman and Government Relations Manager of StarKist, Taotasi Soliai, American Samoa longline owners Carlos Sanchez, Rasela Feliciano and Vince Haleck, American Samoa's Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) Director Henry Sesepasara, and alia fishing boat owner Ma'atulimanu Maea. Central to the story was the dire situation facing the cannery owned by StarKist Samoa. PBS cited decreased demand for canned tuna products, increasing minimum wage requirements, difficulty in competing with other processors (who can pay their labor force a fraction of what StarKist is required to pay), and the battle over access for the American Samoa longline fleet to the Large Vessel Prohibited Area (LVPA) as factors that has imperiled the local tuna industry.

On the topic of the LVPA, an alia owner said on the piece that his ability to catch fish has been hurt by the longline fleet and the Director of DMWR said that attempts to negotiate had been ignored by the fleet. The longline owners contend in the piece that alia are unaffected by the LVPA amendment as they are unable to go that far out. They also note that the fact that they are American Samoans has been hard to cope with. The heavy cost of maintaining the vessels has caused crippling debt in some owners' cases and boats are being put up for sale. Oral arguments were heard in February in that case of ASG and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

2. FISHING TOURNAMENTS

A. 21st Steinlager I'a Lapo'a Game Fishing Tournament

April 20 to 24 of this year will be the dates for American Samoa's biggest and longest running fishing tournament – the Steinlager I'a Lapo'a Game Fishing Tournament. This annual tournament is organized by the local recreational fishermen's organization, the Pago Pago Game Fishing Association, and is an International Game Fishing Association (IGFA) sanctioned event that is open to both recreational and alia fishing boat owners.

In addition to the tournament which lasts for four days each year (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday), the week of the I'a Lapo'a tournament will also be the annual Women & Junior Anglers Tournament, which takes place on the Wednesday of the week of the I'a Lapo'a tournament each year.

The winning team of each year's tournament wins the grand prize of entry into the International Game Fishing Association Offshore World Championships held each year in Costa Rica. There will also be a number of other prizes provided by the association and the event's sponsors and supporters.

B. NMSAS Fagota Mo Taeao Fishing Tournament

The annual fishing tournament held by the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa (NMSAS) is slated for its fourth event in American Samoa. The tournament is held each year on the Friday and Saturday before the Thanksgiving Holiday. The NMSAS has a fishing working group which works with the local recreational fishing association membership and, like the Steinlager I'a Lapo'a Game Fishing Tournament, is open to recreational and alia fishermen.

3. ASG DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

A. Fagatogo Fish Market

The company Island Fisheries Inc. continues to utilize the Fagatogo Fish Market which the Council supported the construction for. In 2009, the Council worked with the local government and fishermen to create a space in town, near the sports fish and alia floating docks, that would serve as a hub for local fishermen to sell their catch. In 2014, the Council assisted those fishermen and the government in renovating the market to include refrigerated glass display cases, floor drainage, a table saw for large fish, walk-in refrigerator, and a prep area with stainless steel counters and a large wash-down sink.

Island Fisheries Inc. leased the market from the American Samoa Government (ASG) last April with plans to buy fish from local fishing boats (longline, recreational and alia) to export to US mainland markets. The plan was to utilize the market as its staging location for preparing and boxing fish before transport to the airport for the weekly Friday cargo flights. Island Fisheries Inc.'s parent company, Island Cargo Support worked with the local government and Hawaiian Airlines to lay the groundwork

for fish to be exported from American Samoa. Hawaiian Airlines was able to dedicate cargo space on their weekly flights from Pago Pago International Airport to Honolulu, and also install a cold storage unit at the airport for the staging of export fish prior to being loaded on the flights.

Unfortunately, Island Fisheries Inc. has had issues with fish supply and since they opened nearly a year ago, has only been able to send a limited number of fish shipments off island. One of the larger shipments was made possible when a longline vessel which operates out of Hawaii was in port to fulfill its obligation to deliver a certain amount of fish to American Samoa (it holds an American Samoa longline limited entry program permit). The company has been able to carve out a local retail market niche with its weekly Friday fish market sales which include loins of pelagic species as well as other value-added products such as poke, sushi, sashimi, smoked fish and fish jerky. Customers flock to the market to buy fish for their families, businesses or just for breakfast or lunch. Unfortunately, the supply of fish has not been a steady one and the company has been forced to close its doors on certain Fridays when fish is not available. Alia longline catch has been the most reliable source of fish for the company which is continuing its search for locally caught fish to support its operations.

B. Aunu'u Alia Development Project

At the 180th Council Meeting in October of last year in American Samoa, the Council made a recommendation that a letter be drafted to support the application being submitted by the American Samoa Government's Department of Commerce for funding to build an initial alia tele vessel. The government was planning to submit a proposal to the Economic Development Administration (EDA) at that time and the Council provided a letter supporting the project.

The Council initially worked with a contract fisheries development officer to put together a framework for a new alia vessel concept to replace the aging fleet, allowing longer trips, larger catch and hold capacity, and improved safety. In addition to the new alia concept, the Council also helped to develop a lending scheme for the vessel's purchase as well as the installation of infrastructure – boat ramp construction, ice machines and a fully functional fish market at the Fagatogo Marketplace.

The Council handed off this fishery development framework off to the American Samoa Government to continue the development of the small boat fisheries in the Territory and the Department of Commerce (DOC) adopted the alia tele project. As reported by DOC during previous Council Meetings, the initial alia tele vessel build would be completed by the ASG. The work would be done in the state of Washington where the boat design was completed. The initial build would be used as a training platform by the government to train local fishermen in hopes that they would purchase an alia tele to improve their fishing operations. DOC submitted the funding proposal to EDA in November with the Council's letter of support. Since that time, the Council staff has learned from DOC that the application was favorably received and during discussions with EDA, the local government was encouraged to re-submit the proposal with an additional two to three vessels included. DOC resubmitted the application in February as

a business incubator program. Under the new proposal, they will use one vessel for training and develop a course for local fishermen. The course is planned to be a 10-week class for both crew and/or owners of fishing vessels. Participants who successfully complete the course will be considered for selection into an alia tele business incubator program where they would be required to hire a crew and utilize one of the other alia tele builds to run a fishing business startup for pre-determined amount of time before graduating and then purchasing their own vessels.

One of the worries that local fishermen have had about the alia tele program has been the large cost to purchase the design which was developed for DOC by Armstrong shipbuilding company in Washington state. DOC is aware of the high construction costs and according to their staff, they are working on plans for modifying the existing design to make it more affordable. That process will include getting feedback from participants in their training program and incubator process, and also having the vessels built by local companies to eliminate shipping costs.