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## **Pelagic and International Standing Committee Meeting Report**

**November 17, 2021**

Roger Dang opened the meeting at 1:00 P.M. In attendance was Roger Dang, Archie Soliai, Chelsa Muna-Brecht, Monique Amani, McGrew Rice, Collin Brinkman and Michael Tosatto

### **1. Update on American Samoa and Hawaii Longline Fisheries**

Russ Ito, PIFSC, provided an update fishery performance of the American Samoa and Hawaii longline fisheries. This will also include an update on electronic reporting implementation. Most of the Hawaii longline fleet is outfitted with electronic logbooks (ELOGS) and there are 28 replacement ELOGS. Captains have been asking for small incremental software updates and improvements, including bait types, noting many vessel moved to milkfish bait.

Standing Committee asked whether the decline in CPUE is due to La Nina. Ito responded it was a possibility, but noted sea surface temperature was warmer than average in some places and lower than average elsewhere. More fishing effort went south than what they have seen before. The Standing Committee member concurred with observations seen in Kona. Ito confirmed they did not notice eddy formations off Kona this year, indicative of good fishing conditions. A Standing Committee member noted milkfish is a good bait and very accessible, as response to Ito's comments on the longline fishery using different bait this past year.

### **2. Modification of Seabird Interaction Mitigation Measures in the Deep-set Longline Fishery**

Council staff provided an overview of the final action on modifying seabird interaction mitigation measures in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery. The Council's preliminary preferred alternatives from the September meeting was to replace blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discard measures for stern-setting deep-set vessels with a new tori line requirement, with modified offal guidance to be provided to fishermen through a non-regulatory approach. Staff presented the draft tori line regulatory specifications, including discussion on whether materials for the tori lines should be specified in regulations, as well as updated analysis on implementing revised offal management best practices under non-regulatory training or through a regulatory change.

Standing Committee members supported Alternative 2, as it provides a practical and successful situation for industry as well as conservation benefit for seabirds, and recognizing that blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge have not provided the intended mitigation effects in recent years.

### **3. Report on ESA Biological Opinions**

Council staff reported that no updates have been provided from PIRO on whether any of the draft Biological Opinions (BiOps) will be available prior to the Council meeting.

Tosatto reported that internal drafts of all three BiOps for Hawaii deep-set longline (DSLL), American Samoa longline (ASLL), and bottomfish fisheries are in the final stages of review at the leadership end, but there are a few issues that need to be worked out in each of the drafts prior to a draft being shared with the action agency and General Counsel in advance of draft clearance for public release and Council review. PIRO has also committed to providing drafts to HLA, the Applicant to the DSLL BiOp, and a group of ASLL vessel owners. Anticipated order of release is DSLL first, then ASLL, and bottomfish. PIRO did not meet the deadline to provide HLA with a draft DSLL BiOp by October 28, and is uncertain if a draft can be provided before the end of November. PIRO plans to share the draft with the Council when a draft is made available to HLA, and Tosatto indicated he would follow up with the Executive Director in coordinating the timing for Council review if it does not coincide with a scheduled Council meeting.

### **4. Report from Hawaii Longline Association**

Eric Kingma described the 2021 fishing year for the Hawaii Longline Association and any issues related to COVID-19 and labor workshops held in 2021. Over 90% vessels converted to wire leader; not as much complaints with losing big fish. But main concern is with time it takes to check the leaders for degradation. The HLA crew training website including protected shark handling guidelines was posted. Catch rates have been very bad lately, likely due to La Nina, with some catch recovery later in 2021. Only albacore has seen an increase in catch since the COVID-19 Pandemic. CNMI quota from specification expected through end of the year. HLA will be submitting EFP for tori lines for shallow-setting to allow some more efficient operations or safety at sea by allowing setting a bit earlier. HLA is applying for NFWF grant for 80 vessels with tori line systems. A positive aspect for the fleet is that prices have been strong due to strong demand and limited supply chains.

A Standing Committee member asked about marlin catch rates. Kingma noted catch rates with mono declined, not sure if due to water temps or mono leader usage.

Ito noted that tuna prices were good and swordfish prices were exceptionally good for the fleet.

### **5. Report from Tautai Samoa Longline Fishing Association**

Vince Haleck provided an update on happenings within the American Samoa Longline Association, the diversification project, fishery participation, and news. There is uncertainty if Edgar Feliciano's vessel will be unable to fish over this season with jigging. Many vessels remain in dry dock. Manu Lemano vessels are the only vessels able to engage in jig fishing.

## **6. Preparations for 18<sup>th</sup> WCPFC Regular Session**

### **A. South Pacific Tuna Treaty Updates**

Council staff provided an overview of the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, which is an international agreement on access fees for purse seine vessels in the EEZ waters of Pacific Island nations. The Treaty is a six year term with four years access fees fixed upon negotiation. The latter two years are negotiated ad hoc. The current access fee agreements are to expire at the end of 2022. The US purse seine fleet primarily fishes in the waters of Tuvalu, Tokelau, Kiribati, and Cook Islands. The US has had separate access fee arrangements with Cook Islands, Kiribati, and a group of other nations. Progress on renegotiation has been slow with only two meetings thus far. The next Treaty meeting is expected in January 2022.

Standing Committee members expressed concern over the shift of fishing towards the IATTC and far west, resulting in fewer offloads in Pago Pago. Members noted it took vessels three to seven days to get Pago Pago vs seventeen to get to Manta, perhaps decisions to not offload in Pago Pago is a business decision.

### **B. South Pacific Albacore Management Issues**

Council staff presented issues regarding South Pacific albacore and anticipated action at the upcoming 18th WCPFC Regular Session. Poor performance with respect to the American Samoa longline fishery was discussed as well as a proposal by the United States to expand the conservation and management measure for South Pacific albacore to encompass the entire stock range. Other issues include proposals to reduce fishing effort in the South Pacific targeting the stock, noting that the stock has gradually declined and CPUE has declined even greater. Despite all of this, the stock is not overfished, nor experiencing overfishing. However, regional depletion in waters around American Samoa persists and there is little to no chance of an interim target reference point for the stock being reached under status quo levels of catch and effort. Therefore, there is a need for the Commission to possibly revise the CMM 2015-02 for the stock and develop harvest strategies.

### **C. US Permanent Advisory Committee to the WCPFC**

Michael Goto, United Fishing Agency, provided an update on the US Permanent Advisory Committee to the WCPFC (PAC). The PAC agreed to propose an increase US longline catch limit for bigeye tuna and retain language on retaining the US position on the Effort Limit Areas for Purse Seine Fisheries (ELAPS). The PAC also made recommendations for the US delegation on South Pacific albacore, striped marlin, and proposal to remove wire leaders in WCPFC longline fisheries to reduce longline fishery impacts on sharks. The wire leader removal proposal was based on the Council's actions. Regarding the Hawaii longline quota, continues to request an increase in the quota as it has for more than 10 years. They've had to rely on the Territory quotas which are uncertain, the current quota does not meet domestic demand, US has the smallest quota relative to other countries and are subject to the highest standards.

#### **D. Proposed Revisions to WCPFC Tropical Tuna CMM**

Tom Graham, PIRO International Fisheries Division, provided an update on the US proposal to revise WCPFC Conservation and Management Measure for Tropical Tunas, CMM 2020-01. US proposal includes a management objective that runs in concert with the WCPFC Chair's report of the Tropical Tuna workshops held in 2021 which recognized "... and excessive spatial unevenness in spawning stock depletion is to be avoided to support thriving fisheries throughout the Convention Area." The US proposal is centered on three parts: 1) Increase minimum longline observer coverage from 5 to 10%, 2) increase bigeye tuna catch limits in longline fisheries, and 3) recognizing American Samoa purse seine vessels as being eligible to benefits of small island developing states and territories afforded in the Convention. The focus of the presentation was on increasing longline catches of US longline fishery from 3,554 mt per year to 6,554 mt per year and retaining the privilege to have recognized specified fishing agreements between Hawaii-based US vessels and the three US Pacific Territories.

Standing Committee members expressed appreciation for allowing feedback on the analyses of proposed changes on the US Participating Territories. And could provide some compassionate feedback on the the US proposal on the floor at the WCPFC on behalf of the Territories..

Eric Kingma thanked Graham for his efforts and putting the proposal forward which is the level of bigeye tuna for the fishery's capacity and Hawaii's largest food producer. Also supports provisions on at-sea transshipment.

Standing Committee members recommend that the US delegation develop talking points to use the argument of regional depletion as grounds to expand fishing privileges for the US Hawaii fleet, noting it fishes almost entirely within a specified region with lowest relative depletion. Specifically, these talking points for the US delegation are with respect of the US fleet being different from other 'distant water' fleets and essentially a local islander fleet. Limited capacity and sizes, limited range, highest level of observer coverage are points of interest. Graham replied that the US scores high on these characteristics and that the Commission should consider in its conservation and management measures.

A Standing Committee member asked if Paragraph 9 (recognition of specified fishing agreements with US Participating Territories) is to be retained, since they did not see it in the presentation. Graham said Paragraph 9 would be retained, per US proposal.

A Standing Committee member asked about the capacity of the Hawaii longline fishery. A Standing Committee member said the fishery is limited entry at 164 vessels. Kingma said that the fishery is limited in vessel size and fleet size, but can reach 8,500 mt catch of bigeye tuna and could exceed the proposed US limit. Seasonally the fleet goes to the east into the IATTC, but very sparingly.

A Standing Committee member asked why WCPFC vessels are not sent back to port when VMS fails. Michael Tosatto said that the burden is that if VMS fails, then reporting manually would be an option. The Standing Committee member said the burden is greater for the US vessels and that some of the foreign fisheries are skirting requirements for VMS

## **7. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

There were no other recommendations

## **8. Other Business**

There was no other business discussed.

## **9. Public Comment**

Will Sword: important that VMS issue is further addressed given the issue with foreign fishing and issues with albacore fisheries suffering. There is a notion that China is “stealing our fish”

Manny Duenes: endorses the proposals for the US fleet to the WCPFC. Recalls as a Council member a 1.2 million metric ton to 1.9 million metric ton harvest of tunas. Further noting catch rates declining over the last three years. Also lamenting that foreign fish sold back to the islands and then loss of fishery production potential due to smaller fish. on BiOp, Council many years ago did a lot of conservation efforts for LB and LH but in the end BiOp did not consider the benefit from those program; half million spent every year should help offset. Asked at NEPA workshop why that information wasn’t considered, and they said the info should’ve been included. 20 years ago it was about mortality, but now it’s about interaction - harder and harder to be a fisherman. On tuna commission, Hawaii should prove its point that its area is strong in terms of tuna stocks.

## **10. Discussion and Recommendations**

- 1) Regarding Modification of Seabird Interaction Mitigation Measures in the Deep-set Longline Fishery, the Pelagic and International Standing Committee recommends the Council adopt as final action Alternative 2, which would replace blue-dyed thawed bait and strategic offal discharge measures required for stern-setting DSL vessels with a new tori line requirement, and implement best practices training on offal management as part of the annual protected species workshop. The SC supports the revised draft tori line regulatory specification, which includes specification for aerial and drag section backbone material with flexibility retained for practical purposes through the “other similar material” language.**

Tosatto said that the recommendation is on the right track, but wants to follow up with PIRO staff. There is not an expectation to object to it at the full Council plenary, and he fully supports the recommendation coming out of this Standing Committee.

- 2) Regarding WCPFC Tropical Tuna Conservation and Management Measure, the Pelagic and International Standing Committee recommends that the US delegation to the WCPFC work to ensure that the US longline catch limit for bigeye tuna is increased, based on the fact that bigeye is not subject to overfishing and Hawaii-based US fleet operates entirely within a region with the lowest regional depletion**

**estimated based the 2020 stock assessment and under the basis that the fishery is truly a Pacific Island fleet providing fresh fish to its local island community. The US delegation should further note to the WCPFC that the Hawaii longline fleet is highly monitored, does not tranship its catch at sea, and is not characteristic of a ‘distant water’ fishery (based on fleet capacity, limited range, and vessel size limits).**

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 PM.