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**Report of the American Samoa Archipelago FEP Advisory Panel Meeting**

Tuesday, June 8, 2021  
Virtual Meeting via Webex

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

Will Sword, American Samoa Advisory Panel (AP) vice Chair, opened the meeting at 5:08 p.m. and welcomed the members. AP members in attendance included: Pafuti Ana Tupua, Nonu Tuisamoa, Dustin Snow, Jerome Ierome, Joseph Faaita, and Brian Thompson.

Others in attendance included: Diana Kitiona, Joshua DeMello, Asuka Ishizaki, Maria Carnevale, Marlowe Sabater, and Mark Fitchett (Council staff); Mia Iwane, Danika Kleiber, Erin Bohaboy, Justin Hospital, Marc Nadon, and Felipe Carvalho (NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC)); and members of the public: Fuamai A Tago, Alphaina Luisamoa, and Eri Faagai.

**2. Review of Last AP Meeting and Recommendations**

Council staff reviewed the report of the last meeting and provided an update on the status of the recommendations made by the AP. In regards to bottomfish in American Samoa, the AP recommended the Council request the American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) work on developing a Community Development Plan (CDP) and also working with the AP to schedule outreach with local fishermen. Staff reported that DMWR is working on planning outreach, including for Manu 'a as well as a CDP to be presented to the Council.

**3. Council Issues**

**a. American Samoa Bottomfish Update**

Council staff presented an update on the status of the rebuilding plan for the overfished bottomfish fishery in American Samoa. At its last meeting in March, the Council was presented with three options to address the overfished condition of the bottomfish fishery: 1) status quo-current interim catch limit of 1,300 lbs. and a post-season Accountability Measure (AM) (where adjustments to the limit would happen to the next fishing year); 2) an Annual Catch Limit of 1,500 lbs. with an in-season AM (where catch would be monitored in near real-time and the season would close when the ACL is projected to be reached); and 3) placing a moratorium on the catch of bottomfish in Federal waters around American Samoa. The Council was also presented with an effects analysis that takes into account the effects of each option on the fishery, biological resources, social conditions, etc. but did not select an alternative at that time to allow DMWR to work on developing a territorial management plan and potential CDP for the bottomfish fishery. The Council instructed staff to fully develop an Environmental Assessment (EA) document and in developing the EA staff asked what the highest level of catch would be to allow rebuilding. After a calculation by NMFS PIFSC provided a projection of what level of catch would be allowed within the 10-year rebuilding timeframe, a fourth option was developed for the Council to consider.

In 10 years, the highest level of catch that would still allow the stock to rebuild was calculated to be 5,000 lbs. This is much higher than the previous options and also allows for DMWR to request a CDP to utilize a portion of that catch for traditional fishing with only an additional year added on to the rebuilding timeframe. Staff presented the effects analysis of this new option and noted that this option allows for greater catch and also an increased consideration of cultural fishing. He noted that this option will be provided to the Council at its 186th meeting in June for their consideration of including it into the rebuilding plan. If the Council agrees, the EA will be updated to include an environmental analysis of this option and the rebuilding plan, with four options, will be presented to the Council for final action in September. Staff also noted that much of the rebuilding plan is also contingent upon DMWR providing complementary regulations and a management plan.

The vice Chair asked if cultural take was included in the new calculation. Staff responded that it is included and this new level addresses the General Counsel's concern regarding the CDP. He said that the CDP could include economic relief for when the fishery is closed and might also help support diversifying the fishery by helping them to target other species.

The AP agreed that economic relief for fishermen is important but there also needs to be a way to accelerate the rebuilding of the stock through other ways such as stock enhancement and asked if there was room for more frequent/regular assessments. Staff responded that the stock assessments are on a timeline. NMFS PIFSC staff subsequently responded that the stock assessment will be revisited every three years, either as an update or a benchmark assessment. ***The AP recommended that any CDP should also include stock enhancement, economic relief, and more frequent assessments.***

#### **b. Territory Bigeye Specifications**

Council staff presented on the 2022 territorial bigeye limit and allocation specifications. Amendment 7 to the Council's Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan established a management framework that provides catch or effort limits applicable to the U.S. Participating Territories that includes the authority of the territories to use, assign, allocate and manage the pelagic management species catch and effort limits agreed to by the WCPFC through specified fishing agreements with U.S. vessels permitted under the Pelagic FEP for the purposes of responsible fisheries development. The AP previously discussed specifications and allocations and recent options included an allocation of up to 1,500 metric tons (mt) of territory but with a cap of 3,000 mt total. For 2019, the Council's specifications limited each U.S. Participating Territory's bigeye longline catch to 2,000 mt and its allocation limit with U.S.-flagged vessels to up to 1,000 mt. However, only two agreements were made with U.S.-flagged vessels and the fishery closed before the end of the fishing season on Dec. 28, 2019. For fishing years 2020 and 2021, the Council took action at its 181<sup>st</sup> and 182<sup>nd</sup> meeting in March and June 2020 to specify bigeye longline catch and allocation limits up to 2,000 mt for each territory, with total allocations from all U.S. Participating Territories not to exceed 3,000 mt. The 2020 specification let U.S.-flagged vessels remain operational through 2020 and the 2021 specification went to final rule in January 2021.

At its 186<sup>nd</sup> meeting, the Council will consider taking final action on the specification of the 2022 territory bigeye longline limits for American Samoa (as well as Guam and the CNMI).

Staff provided options for the 2022 specifications which included: 1) no action; 2) the status quo- A 2,000 mt catch limit for each territory with allocation limits that do not collectively exceed 3,000 mt for all territories; and 3) A 2,000 mt limit for each territory with allocations limits that do not exceed 2,000 mt for each US territory. He explained that under the current management regime, the US fishery has the smallest allocation amongst all fisheries in the Pacific. This action would allow for the US bigeye tuna fishery to remain operational throughout the fishing year.

The AP asked if there was a lot of tuna that could be harvested. Staff responded that there may be a lot of underutilized tuna in the territories especially because catch has been low in American Samoa, particularly for albacore. The AP asked if bigeye is not targeted because of the price. Staff responded that the demand is for fresh bigeye rather than frozen, which is how albacore is caught and that the majority of the bigeye stock is in the northern temperate areas as well making it harder to find around American Samoa.

***The AP agreed that the status quo was working and the most flexible and recommended the Council select alternative 2 that provides for a 2,000 mt catch limit for the territories with a 3,000 mt total allocation limit.***

**c. Gear and Release Requirements to Improve Post-Hooking Survivorship of Oceanic Whitetip Shark**

Council staff presented options to improve the post-hooking survivorship of oceanic whitetip sharks. In an effort to reduce impacts to Endangered Species Act-listed oceanic whitetip sharks and other protected species, the Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) announced at the 184th Council meeting in December 2020 that their member vessels will voluntarily eliminate the use of wire leaders by July 1, 2021, and use monofilament nylon leaders or other similar materials in its place. HLA also announced that it will focus on crew safety and work with vessel owners, captains and crew to utilize best practices, including deploying flyback prevention devices and branch line weight configurations and materials that would minimize flyback. In addition, HLA committed to work with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Council to lead captain and crew training on how to properly implement handling protocols.

Staff said that the Council, at its 186th meeting, is considering a regulatory amendment to the Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) to prohibit the use of wire leaders to improve post-hooking survivorship of oceanic whitetip sharks and potentially other protected species. She presented the alternatives that the Council will consider: 1) No Action/Status Quo 2) Prohibit wire leaders in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery and require removal or trailing gear from oceanic whitetip sharks (preliminary preferred alternative) with sub-alternatives (i. Sub-Alternative A: Require removal of trailing gear only in the Hawaii deep-set longline fishery; ii. Sub-Alternative B: Require removal of trailing gear in all Western Pacific pelagic longline fisheries operating under the Pelagic FEP); and 3) Prohibit wire leaders in all Western Pacific pelagic longline fisheries and require removal or trailing gear from oceanic whitetip sharks. Staff provided the AP with the analyses of the alternatives.

An AP member asked if this action was for local longlines and not international fleets. Council staff responded yes, that the action would apply to any longline managed under the Pacific

Pelagics Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP). The US could take this measure to the international fishery organizations and request it be utilized by other countries as well.

The AP noted that the local longliners always use mono and never wire leaders, even in the alia fishery.

An AP member asked how the survival rate is calculated. Staff responded NMFS PIFSC has been doing tagging work through the observer program where they cut the leader at different intervals after being tagged and monitor the shark. Another AP member asked about the survival rate for shorter trailing gear. Staff responded that in general, the research has shown that the survival rate goes down as the length of the trailing gear increases.

The AP agreed that when fishermen hook a shark, they try to bring the shark in as close as possible because they want to save as much gear as they can and hopefully retrieve the lure as well. However, fishermen also want to avoid putting themselves in danger so they will cut the leader based on safety.

The AP noted that the local fisheries do not employ wire leaders so the action wouldn't affect their fisheries and would mainly affect Hawaii's fisheries. However, they noted that this is something that should be addressed internationally as well to help protect shark populations without affecting catch. *The AP deferred to the Hawaii AP on selecting an alternative, since it affects the Hawaii fishery, but recommends the Council encourage international application of these results in all of the Pacific fisheries.*

#### **4. American Samoa Reports**

Council staff reported on Motu Lipoti and what DMWR is going to report at the 186CM; tournament report; update on alia upgrades and other fishery development under SFF

An AP member noted that the location of fishing is important and the use of tournaments to collect data should also be spread out at different times of the year to potentially record seasonality in catch and location. Another AP member noted that the Catchit, Logit program incentives helped with getting some of that data while other members noted that fishermen will hesitate to provide location data.

The AP inquired about the use of CILI in the last fishing tournament and wondered if any bottomfish was recorded. The vice Chair said that 14 of 19 boats turned in catch data. Staff reported that no bottomfish was caught during the tournament.

##### **a. 2020 Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report**

Council staff presented a summary of the 2020 Annual SAFE Report that will be published soon. The report shows declines in catches which are mainly attributed to COVID-19 impacts to the commercial fishery as well as impacted creel survey sampling effort. While catch was low, more catch was sold although there was a decrease in fish price. The longline fishery continued to show a decade long decline and had less boats resulting in a decrease in pelagic effort and an all-time low in pelagic landings. This subsequently reduced revenue due to the low amount of albacore catch which makes up a majority of the catch. The report also added new sections that

identify the impacts of COVID on the fisheries as well as a fishermen-led observation section that describes what fishermen have seen in the fishery over that year.

An AP member asked about longliners trolling for albacore as there was a program looking at that and asked if any data was available. Staff responded that there were 4 vessels that participated and 3 were successful, but the data was provided to the NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center in LaJolla and the Council is looking forward to the report.

#### **b. Fisheries Research and Priorities**

The vice Chair provided the AP an opportunity to discuss fisheries research and priorities for American Samoa fisheries.

The AP noted that bottomfish should be a priority and an AP member encouraged the idea of stock enhancement through more artificial reefs and such. Another AP member said that more locally caught fresh fish should be a priority and research should be aimed at helping to establish that improvement. The vice Chair noted that ice is important, especially in Manu‘a. AP members also noted that shark depredation is happening and more prevalent, though not as bad as the Marianas.

#### **5. Report on American Samoa Archipelago FEP AP Plan Activities**

AP vice Chair gave a brief report on AS AP activities in the last quarter. AP vice Chair worked with Catchit, Logit Contractor, Major Aiumu, on a 30-minute studio shoot with the local television station to kick-off the airing of Catchit, Logit PSA. They talked about the use of the app and its importance for fishery management. The Catchit, Logit PSA was aired on March 22nd after the filming of the 30-minute discussion of the app.

AP also had an information booth at the Catchit, Logit Fishing Tournament in April. AP members worked on putting together trivia questions and developed word puzzles that were given out to students. AP brochures and Council informational flyers were also distributed to the public.

AP members are still working with PSA contractor on the development of educational PSAs. Members helped with obtaining signed talent forms from the participants for the shooting. AP hopes that filming will be completed during the summer.

The Manu‘a Student Fishing Tournament has been planned by AP members in collaboration with DMWR. AP developed a draft agenda for the one-day tournament. Due to the closure of the Ofu airport, the project has been delayed.

The AP agreed that the PSA project needs to move forward. One AP member noted that he has had communication with community members in Manu‘a regarding the student tournament and they are excited for it, but the coordinators are working to figure out transportation.

#### **6. Fishery Issues and Activities**

The vice Chair reported that the Vaitogi FADs were missing and that DMWR should probably put locator beacons on all the FADs. DMWR put out three FADs prior to the tournament but two of them are now gone, so there needs to be research into how to keep the FADs on station.

An AP member noted that the lack of ice is still a problem mainly because there is no one available 24-7 to provide ice. Another AP member noted that AS Power Authority is remodeling Ofu Harbor and adding ice capabilities at the ASPA plant at the wharf. The wharf is monitored 24 hours a day so ice would also be available. Another AP member noted that the petroleum cooperative also bought more totes to hold gas so hopefully this allows for more fishing.

The AP discussed changes to the boat ramp in Pago and noted that DMWR and public works is aware of the problems and seeing what can be done to fix the problems. Another AP member noted the need for a boat ramp on the East side of the island because the Auasi ramp is too far. She said that there should be one between Faga'itua and Lauli'i. All AP members also agreed a boat ramp is needed in Leone for the west side of the island.

## **7. Public Comment**

There was no public comment.

## **8. Discussion and Recommendations**

The American Samoa Advisory Panel made the following recommendations:

### ***Regarding American Samoa Bottomfish:***

- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council include Alternative 4 into the rebuilding plan for analysis.
- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council request DMWR to complete a CDP that includes opportunities for stock enhancement, economic relief, and more frequent assessments.

### ***Regarding the 2022 Territory Bigeye Specification:***

- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council select alternative 2

### ***Regarding the Wire Leader Amendment:***

- The American Samoa AP deferred to the Hawaii AP position on this issue since it mainly affects the Hawaii fishery and recommended the Council encourage the use of this measure by the international fleets.

### ***Regarding American Samoa Fisheries Issues:***

- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council request DMWR to assist fishermen by putting a boat ramp on the Far East Side (between Faga'itua and Lauli'i) and far West Side (Leone)
- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council commend ASPA on including ice machines in Ofu and encourages them to do something similar in Tau
- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council ensure that DMWR includes infrastructure improvements in the AS Marine Conservation Plan.

***Regarding AS AP Administrative Matters:***

- The American Samoa AP recommended the Council appoint Nate Ilaoa, former Council staff, to the AP as an alternate member.

**9. Other Business**

NMFS PIFSC provided a report on their work to improve the American Samoa bottomfish stock assessment. He gave a brief overview of the American Samoa Stock Assessment Improvement Process including reviewing the data through a workshop with the fishermen and invited participation to ensure that the data was accurate. He noted that the next stock assessment will be done in 2023 using next generation models and NMFS is putting a lot of resources into this effort.

The AP noted that ever since the stock assessment for bottomfish was developed, the general consensus of the AP is that the data that was collected had an impact on what is happening today; the question is how much of the data that came out of American Samoa was not good as there is no shortage of bottomfish around the islands. NMFS PIFSC staff said that they heard a lot of the problems about the data and the decision to create a framework to take the time to really look at the data was triggered by the AP's concerns. These efforts will produce a document that will be presented and made publicly available but noted that they can't do anything about the quality of the data, only how it is applied for the stocks assessment.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.