



Report of the CNMI-Mariana Archipelago FEP Advisory Panel Meeting

Saturday, June 12, 2021
Virtual Meeting via Webex

1. Welcome and Introductions

Richard Farrell, CNMI Advisory Panel (AP) vice Chair, opened the meeting at 9:01 am and welcomed the participants. AP members in attendance included: Michael Fleming, Lawrence Concepcion, Ray Tebuteb, Jun Yamagishi. Absent were Ray Delacruz, Cecilio Raiukiulipiy and Perry Mesngon. Clay Tam, AP Chair, was also in attendance.

Others in attendance were Floyd Masga, Zach Yamada, Maria Carevale and Joshua DeMello (Council Staff).

2. Review of Last AP Meeting and Recommendations

Council staff reported on the last AP meeting held March 13, 2021 and he noted that no recommendations were made during the last AP Meeting.

3. Council Issues

A. Guam Bottomfish Update

Council staff provided an update on the status of the Guam bottomfish fishery rebuilding plan. In February 2020, NMFS informed the Council about the change in stock status for the Guam bottomfish management unit species complex from not overfished and not subject to overfishing to overfished. The Magnuson-Stevens Act and National Standard 1 require the Council to develop a rebuilding plan and submit the amendment package within 15 months of notification. Staff reported that the Council has worked with NMFS and Guam to develop a rebuilding plan and an Annual Catch Limit (ACL) of 27,000 pounds was implemented for each of fishing years 2020 to 2022 to prevent overfishing. After receiving the catch data for 2020, the biomass projection was recalculated and a previous option of 31,000 lbs. is again available for the Council to consider.

The AP was informed that the Council at its 186th meeting will consider taking final action on the Guam Rebuilding Plan, and provided the alternatives under considerations: 1) status quo-continue to use an ACL of 27,000 pounds with an in-season accountability measure (AM); 2) Implement an ACL of 27,000 pounds, an in-season AM and a higher performance standard. If the total catch is maintained below this level, the bottomfish stock will be rebuilt in 5 years; 3) implement an ACL of 16,299 pounds, an in-season AM and a higher performance standard. If the total catch is maintained below this level, the bottomfish stock will be rebuilt in 3 years; 4) implement an ACL of 31,000 pounds, an in-season AM and a higher performance standard. If the total catch is maintained below this level, the bottomfish stock will be rebuilt in 8 years; or 5) apply a temporary moratorium on bottomfish fishing in federal waters. If the territory is able to apply a similar moratorium in territorial waters, the bottomfish stock will be rebuilt in 2 years.

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 181st and 182nd 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 186nd meeting, the Council will consider taking final action on the specification of the 2022 territory bigeye longline limits for CNMI (as well as Guam and the CNMI). Staff provided options for the 2022 specifications for the AP to consider 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 continue remaining operational throughout the fishing year.

The AP was concerned about any option that would require the territories to compete with each other. They wanted to avoid territories under cutting each other. Council staff noted that option 3 could do that but it was designed to let the fishery and the territories work together.

The AP agreed that the current agreement system in place has worked for the CNMI and has provided an opportunity for all of the territories to engage with the fishing industry to develop an agreement. *The AP recommended the Council continue the status quo and select alternative 2.*

4. CNMI Reports

Council staff reported on CNMI Community Activities and Issues and noted the fishery development projects in CNMI. Staff reported on the improvements being made to Garapan Fishing Base and the revetment and bottomfish demonstration and training projects on Rota. He said that upcoming projects will include additional improvements to Garapan Fishing Base, improving fishery data collection, dock repairs, and vessel maintenance and operations.

A. 2020 Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report

Council staff provided a report on the 2020 Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report for the Mariana Archipelago. The annual report provides a look at the fishery performance in CNMI and Guam in 2020 including trends in catch and effort. Staff reported that in 2020, there was a nearly 400% increase in Bottomfish catch in CNMI due to a high catch of redgill emperor and an increase in effort. The opposite was true for Guam where they saw a decrease in effort and in catch. This was attributed to the data collection efforts in Guam being hampered by COVID-19 restrictions in Guam but not in CNMI. For pelagic trolling, CNMI had a large increase in troll trips but had zero charter trips due to COVID impacts while Guam troll trips remained relatively consistent but had a decrease in total catch.

An AP member asked if the data in the report included data from Catchit, Logit. Staff responded that it did not due to the program not having enough data and the numbers are from the fishery survey data in the CNMI.

B. Fisheries Research and Priorities

The vice Chair provided an opportunity to the AP to provide any fishery research and priorities that the CNMI AP would like the Council to focus on.

The AP noted that the Coral Critical Habitat issue is a priority and research that would help identify the areas where the corals exist and which habitats are critical.

Also research needed on squid as there is interest in fisheries for an export business. Council staff reported that that Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG) had been in contact with vendors that have shown interest, but have not submitted their required documents.

C. Shark Depredation Project Update

Council staff provided a report on the shark depredation project in the Mariana Archipelago that was conducted by Carl Meyer and Derek Kraft of the University of Hawaii-Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology working with fishermen in Guam and CNMI. When fishermen bring in a fish that was bitten by a shark, they would swab the fish and put it in a tube and ship that sample to Hawaii. The researchers then took that swab to isolate the DNA to determine which species of shark was responsible. The researchers hoped to get at least 80 samples but got about half of that which was still robust enough to get information. Results showed that none of the sharks that were taking fish were the Endangered Oceanic Whitetip sharks, which would alleviate Endangered Species Act concerns for fishermen. Most of the depredated fish samples were bottomfish but there were some troll caught fish as well. The species of sharks that were found to be depredating fish were mainly silky, tiger, and silvertip sharks. A final report will be provided this summer and the researchers are willing to provide a more in-depth report on the project to the AP after that. He passed on thanks from the researchers to the AP members for helping get samples and shipping it over, especially in the midst of the pandemic.

AP members commented that it's good that the Oceanic Whitetip Shark wasn't found and appreciated the research.

5. Report on Mariana Archipelago FEP AP Plan Activities

The vice Chair reported on the Tinian Fiesta Derby results, noting that an AP member won with a marlin weighing 471 lbs. He also reported that a Tasi to Table (TTT) youth derby was currently happening and that he is working with TTT on Tinian to assist high school students in chartering their own fishing group and marine science club.

An AP member reported that the APNEA (Gamson) Octopus Derby was a success and results were shared online. Another member reported that the Mafute Derby is coming up in August and this event has become the key tournament for smaller vessels.

An AP member suggested that the AP should work to support the Pacific Mini-Games. This event involves cross-cultural activities to include fishing and traditional knowledge and it is a regional effort that could allow for the AP to conduct outreach activities.

6. Fishery Issues and Activities

The vice Chair shared updates on the CNMI CARES Act. The CNMI CARES Act Fisheries Working Group was made aware that one additional document is required in order to process payment checks for CNMI eligible applicants under the Act. According to Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC), all eligible applicants must provide a completed Internal Revenue Service Tax Form W-9. This form displays an individual or business establishment's name, taxpayer identification number, address, and signature. The submission of this form would allow authorities to collect taxes on this grant assistance. The PSMFC also informed the CNMI CARES Act Fisheries Working Group that Guam and American Samoa fisheries entities had to submit this document before any of their checks were to be issued as well. The additional required document will push the payout date past the scheduled June 15th deadline. The Working Group has asked applicants to be patient as the required form is an essential piece of the process.

The vice Chair also reported that the atulai run has been occurring around Tinian. Community members have reported an aggregation of atulai in the marina. The community in Tinian is catching and sharing the fish.

An AP member recommended the need to have USCG do surveillance training and have a local enforcement officer on board to train. This would allow for local enforcement officers to be able to conduct surveillance and provide local knowledge to the USCG. ***The AP agreed and recommended the Council request the USCG to provide this type of opportunity.*** The AP member also shared that during the past tournaments, USCG was conducting a vessel inspection, taking valuable fishing time away from the fishers. AP members suggested that tournament organizers reach out to the USCG regarding this issue and to come to an agreement prior to the tournament.

7. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

8. Discussion and Recommendations

The CNMI Advisory Panel made the following recommendations:

Regarding Territory Bigeye Specifications:

- The CNMI AP recommended the Council maintain the status quo and select alternative 2.

Regarding CNMI Fishery Issues:

- The CNMI AP recommended the Council request the US Coast Guard invite local enforcement agencies to join them on surveillance training around CNMI.

9. Other Business

There was no other business discussed.

The meeting adjourned at 10:01 am.