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Paul Doremus
Acting Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Subject: Proposed American Samoa ESA-listed coral critical designation

Talofa Mr. Doremus:

I am pleased to submit our comments regarding the Proposed Rule, “Endangered and Threatened Species; Critical Habitat for the Threatened Indo-Pacific Corals” published in the Federal Register November 27, 2020.

I wish to express dissatisfaction on the proposed coral critical habitat designation for American Samoa.

The proposed designation covers a large area of coral reef habitat and does not reflect the critical habitat of the threatened corals. Additionally, the proposed designation was developed without consultation with relevant local agencies using better and current locally-driven sources of scientific data. This is, yet another, example of proposed federal policies that have not gone through proper vetting, consultation, and input from local stakeholders.

Although I concur with NMFS on the need to conserve resources and protect threatened and endangered species, these conservation efforts need to be both practical and beneficial to achieve the desired goals. The proposed coral critical habitat designation is redundant with other local and federal regulations. American Samoa is already highly-federally regulated in terms of environmental policies. American Samoa has a local Project Notification and Review System and follows National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) policies, and relevant Essential Fish Habitat and Endangered Species Act consultations. Additionally, American Samoa has an established local regulation against coral damage and designated marine protected areas that protect our coral reefs through the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa, the National Park of American Samoa, the wildlife refuge, the Rose Island Marine National Monument and the village marine protected areas.

The inclusion of large areas of our coral reefs as coral critical habitats will add additional consultation burden to federally-funded projects. This will include critical infrastructure projects and research programs. We foresee that coral critical habitat designation may lead to further loopholes for local development and infrastructure projects. Like the whole process of listing

Proposed American Samoa ESA-listed coral critical designation

5/26/2021

Page 2

corals under the Endangered Species Act, this is a waste of taxpayers' money that otherwise should be directed to more pressing needs and services.

The biggest threat to American Samoa coral reefs is global climate change and our coral reefs constitute less than 1% of the geographical range of these ESA-listed corals. The threats to these ESA-listed corals are beyond our local jurisdiction and designating large areas of our coral reefs as critical habitat will not protect these corals. We need to address global climate change and habitat destruction as threats to these listed at more appropriate levels. We need to develop coral reef conservation that is meaningful, effective and locally-relevant.

Although I support conservation efforts, I do not support additional federal regulation for coral critical habitat when these protections are covered under local statute. American Samoa is fully capable of managing its resources for the protection and conservation of species for generations to come, under the local regulations mentioned above. The Department of Marine & Wildlife Resources (DMWR) has jurisdictional authority for management of fish and wildlife including endangered species in American Samoa. I highly urge NMFS to work, collaborate and consult with DMWR and relevant local stakeholders prior to critical habitat designation for American Samoa. Keeping in mind that this proposed designation is within territorial waters, this collaborative effort will result in more efficient results that will better protect the corals of American Samoa.

Sincerely,



LEMANU P. S. MAUGA

Governor

cc: Honorable Talauega E. V. Ale, Lieutenant Governor
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