



**Western
Pacific
Regional
Fishery
Management
Council**

December 17, 2021

Alexa Cole, Director
Office of International Affairs & Seafood Inspection
NOAA Fisheries
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

David Hogan, Director
Office of Marine Conservation
U. S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Alexa and David:

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Council) at its 189th Meeting held virtually December 8-10, 2021, made several recommendations requesting strategic planning between NMFS and the Department of State to address issues regarding the American Samoa longline fishery within the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). These recommendations are in response to lack of progress earlier this month at the WCPFC 18th Regular Session (WCPFC18) to develop or amend conservation and management measures (CMMs) that ensure viability of US and American Samoa fisheries that target South Pacific albacore. There is an urgent need to strengthen American Samoa's relations with neighboring Pacific Island nations and for the US to develop a roadmap for the WCPFC to adopt measures that reduces hardships for the American Samoa longline fishery. The Council made the following recommendations for NMFS and the State Department to address these needs:

Regarding the American Samoa South Pacific albacore fishery, the Council:

Requested NMFS to continue talks with Pacific Island nations and to request that American Samoa be a part of the discussions with the South Pacific Group and other Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency members.

The American Samoa longline fishery, which targets South Pacific albacore, has suffered a continuous decline in fishery performance since 2007. Since then, total annual catch of South Pacific albacore by certain distant water nations had increased dramatically and the 2020 stock assessment showed relatively high levels of regional depletion in and around American Samoa. In 2020, the fleet's catch rates were nearly two-thirds the level considered profitable. Concerns of increased catches and stock depletion having negative impacts on Pacific Island fisheries had been expressed at WCPFC18 by the South Pacific Group, which consists of neighboring Niue, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga. These nations suggested that an increase in bigeye longline catch limits would have a negative impact on South Pacific albacore fisheries and that a freeze on longline fishing effort in the high seas south of the Equator is needed. This is also position made by Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) members that focus on high

seas catch and fishing effort limits. American Samoa, which shares cultural commonalities South Pacific Group members, has suffered the worst of Pacific Island states and territories with respect to fishery hardships and has no high seas access. Decreased fishing effort on the high seas alone may not be adequate to put the stock on track to reach its interim target reference point or ensure viability of all Pacific Island fisheries south of the Equator. Therefore, American Samoa needs to be included in discussions among the South Pacific Group and other FFA members, who have shared concerns over South Pacific albacore. Specifically, the Council made a recommendation towards an agreeable goal:

Regarding Outcomes of WCPFC 18th Regular Session, the Council:

Requested NMFS and the State Department to convene meetings with American Samoa and the South Pacific Group with respect to South Pacific albacore fisheries, and develop a mutually-agreed plan to reduce regional depletion of albacore in waters north of 20°S

The latest stock assessment indicated that regional depletion was greatest in waters north of 25°S towards the Equator, in waters consisting mostly of the Exclusive Economic Zones of FFA members with some high seas access. The existing CMM for South Pacific albacore, CMM-2015-02, includes effort and reporting provisions for waters south of 20°S, which includes waters mostly on the high seas. The current CMM does very little to address regional depletion or for improving local fishery performance of South Pacific Group fisheries or for American Samoa's longline fishery. This renders a need for NMFS and the State Department to help in posturing American Samoa within negotiations with the South Pacific Group in order to work towards a satisfactory solution.

I look forward to working with you and kindly request that these recommendations be considered a priority in 2022. Feel free to contact me at kitty.simonds@noaa.gov or via telephone at +1 (808) 522-8220 if you wish to discuss these recommendations further.

Sincerely,



Kitty M. Simonds
Executive Director

CC: Kelly Kryc, Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Fisheries, NOAA
Michael Tosatto, Pacific Islands Regional Administrator
L. Alex Kahl, International Fisheries Division, Pacific Islands Regional Office
C. Colin Brinkman, Department of State
Rebecca Wintering, Department of State
Vince Haleck, Tautai Samoa Longline Fishing Association
Archie Soliai, Chair, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council