



WESTERN
PACIFIC
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MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

Report of the American Samoa Archipelago FEP Advisory Panel Meeting

Thursday, March 10, 2022

6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. (SST)

Virtual Meeting via Webex

1. Welcome and Introductions

Nate Iloa, American Samoa Advisory Panel (AP) vice Chair, opened the meeting at 6:01 p.m. and welcomed the members. American Samoa AP members in attendance included: Joseph Faaita, Samuel Meleisea, Dustin Snow, Frank Barron, Jerome Ierome, Nonu Tuisamoa and Pafuti Ana Tupua. Advisory Panel Chair Clay Tam was also in attendance.

Also in attendance was: Archie Soliai (Council Chair), Kitty Simonds (Council Executive Director); Diana Kitiona, Zach Yamada, Marlowe Sabater, Joshua DeMello, Mark Mitsuyasu, Maria Carnevale, Floyd Masga, Asuka Ishizaki and Matt Seeley (Council staff); Domingo Ochavillo (SSC member); T Todd Jones, Robert Ahrens, Heather Cronin, Justin Hospital (NMFS PIFSC); Michael Marsik (PIRO);

2. Review of Last AP Meeting and Recommendations

Council staff reviewed the report and recommendations from the last AS AP meeting held on November 16, 2022. She reviewed the recommendations made at that meeting and provided an update on the status of those recommendations.

3. AS Fishery Issues and Activities

a. Bottomfish

i. Options for Revising the Territorial BMUS

T Todd Jones and Rob Ahrens, NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, presented an analysis for refining the Bottomfish Management Unit Species (BMUS) list and its contribution to the improvements in future stock assessments. He reviewed the different requirements for federal MUS from MSA and the National Standard 1 guidelines and presented the results of hierarchical clustering of creel interviews for boat-based operations in American Samoa and Guam. The analysis is intended to delineate species aggregations that are potentially experiencing similar fishing pressure to facilitate when used in conjunction with life history information, the determination of species complexes for FMPs and FEPs. The results of the cluster analysis showed a clear differentiation between shallow-water species and deep-water species. The clustering was consistent despite the length of the time series.

Council staff presented the options for revising the territorial BMUS complex based on the cluster analysis and the life history synthesis. The original Bottomfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Western Pacific Region listed 20 fish species that dominated the landings, which included both shallow and deep-water species. The BMUS were grouped into a single bottomfish complex for stock assessment and management purposes. The territory bottomfish fisheries have evolved over time with the rise and fall of large vessel fleets and various sporadic fishery

development projects. The current bottomfish fisheries consist of small boats undertaking single-day trips with a low number of participants targeting both coral reef fish and deep-water snappers using the same pole-and-line gear. The Council under MSA 600.305(c)(7) is required to periodically review the FMPs and the best scientific information available and determine if the stocks are appropriately identified. Staff presented two options: 1) no action and retaining the current composition of the BMUS complex for American Samoa and Guam; and 2) revise the BMUS complex based on the cluster analysis and life history synthesis; the Advisory Panel were asked which option they supported.

An AP member noted that flexibility seems to be the key. Option 1 isn't flexible enough and seems to be more rigid. Another AP member said that option 2 allowed greater flexibility, and that separating the species is the best direction for the future.

Council staff asked if option 2 would have an impact on how the AP fished. An AP member replied that fishermen are stuck in their ways and would continue to fish the exact same way.

The vice Chair asked how the change in BMUS would affect stock assessments going forward. Council staff replied that the change in BMUS would be reflected in the stock assessments down the line but the upcoming assessment will be based on the current BMUS. Jones said that the change is a multifaceted approach to improving stock assessments based on data collection. Being able to change the BMUS list opens up the door to a suite of stock assessment tools, including the ability to utilize indicator species. This science driven analysis of the fishery and the alignment of what is caught is one of the most significant things to do with the stock assessment.

The AP agreed that what was needed was flexibility for the fishery. The AP noted that Option 2 was the most flexible.

ii. American Samoa Data Workshop

Council staff reported on the AS BF data workshop hosted by the Council, PIFSC and DMWR. The objective of the workshop was to review and analyze the data set to inform the 2023 BMUS stock assessment. This workshop solicited advice from AS BF fishermen on changes in the fishery to better understand trends in the data. Staff reviewed the available and provided dates, times, location and meeting logistics. Tutuila had a total of 12 fishers that includes six commercial and six non-commercial fishers. Two of the 12 fishers were in the fisheries in the 1960s and 1970s. There were further breakout groups into English and Samoan speaking participants to discuss different aspects of the data set. The meeting in Manu'a had 27 fishers that included five village chiefs, one mayor, four women, five who have fished since the 1960s and one fisher from Ofu.

An AP member said that the presentation had one consistent factor that most of the fishermen agreed that the bottomfish has declined. The data collected was not consistent with what the fishermen catch. Another AP member said that the catch data from the BF tournaments were consistent with the workshop findings.

iii. Bottomfish Biosampling Update

An update on bottomfish biosampling was not available.

b. BiOp Updates (Bottomfish and Longline)

Council staff provided an update on the Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 consultations required for federal fisheries. A consultation is ongoing for territorial bottomfish as a result of Oceanic Whitetip sharks (OWT) being listed under the Act in 2018. The consultation began in 2019 and was supposed to be a 135-day process but the consultation is still not complete. An expected completion date of February was estimated but the Council is yet to see a draft. The Council expects an update on the timing at its meeting in March. The consultation and analysis will review whether the bottomfish fisheries in American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, and Hawaii have had any interactions with the OWT sharks. At the outset of the consultation there was not much information on interactions so the Council doesn't expect any additional requirements to the fishery as a result of the consultation. She said that once the draft is complete and provided to the Council, the AP will be provided an update for its consideration.

The AP asked which species were being reviewed. Council staff replied that it reviews all ESA listed species that are relevant to the fisheries. For bottomfish fisheries, OWT and any other species like sea turtles that overlap with the fishery, even if they are unaware of any interactions. There have been no confirmed records of OWT sharks caught in the bottomfish fishery so going into the consultation it should have been limited in scale. For the longline fishery it is mainly sea turtles (green and leatherback) that interact with the fishery, as well as OWT and Giant Manta Ray.

An AP member noted that a lot of fishermen experience sharks during their trips but are unable to distinguish what ate the fish as you never see the shark. Council staff replied that generally consultations are on those direct interactions and what is unseen is not incorporated.

c. CCC Working Group on EEJ

Council staff provided an update on the Council coordination committee (CCC) working group on equity and environmental justice (EEJ). The Council continues to gather input for WP EEJ planning and the related national planning efforts with the CCC and NMFS. Feedback to date was shared, and the members were offered the opportunity to add additional examples on how the federal government could help make things fairer for our underserved communities. The members discussed concerns on new regulations, the need for a holistic approach to the EEJ term, and better characterizations for our western Pacific communities. A better understanding of resources, the inherent problem with the fishing community needing constant advocacy to "fight for the right to fish" and shoreline privatization inhibits fisher access. The latter may need broader legal remedies for resolution. As part of the process, she provided feedback received to date and solicited feedback from the AP.

4. 2022 Advisory Panel Activities Plan

a. SFF Project Updates

Council staff provided an update on the American Samoa AP SFF projects. There were two completed projects under SFF11. She reported that the gear diversification project was still in development due to issues with dry dock availability. SFF12 supported the albacore study

contract, the alia vessel upgrades, training for educators and the Manu‘a student fishing tournament. DMWR reviewed the script for the educator training and developed the planning workshop with the DOE, but this plan interrupted due to distance learning and COVID. The contractor for the Manu‘a tournament was ready to receive equipment for the tournament, but planning was halted due to scheduling conflicts with holidays.

b. CILI Updates

Council staff provided an updated on the implementation of CatchIt LogIt. She reported that there were only five reports filed in November 2022.

The vice Chair asked if the AP members have been using CILI in the recent tournaments. An AP member said that it wasn't used but was unsure why, maybe because DMWR was there and collected data. The vice Chair reminded the AP that the catch data can be entered after the fact as well.

c. Education and Outreach

Council staff provided the report on the American Samoa AP education and outreach plan.

5. Feedback from the Fleet

The AP members provided observations in the fishery and ecosystem between January and March as well as provided issues in the fishing community. Comments centered on the cost of fuel increasing and shark depredation being the biggest concerns.

6. Public Comment

Taotasi Archie Soliai, Director of DMWR, commented that there was no bottomfish data collected from the Manu‘a islands since 2009. The fishermen still harvested fish but it was not being reported back to DMWR. He also commented on environmental Justice and noted that American Samoa continues to not be recognized as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) under the WCPFC, mainly because the way the US manages the purse seine fleet. He said this is an international issue but it impacts local fisheries and the local economy. Promises that were made by NMFS with respect to develop a marine science lab more than 10 years ago remain unfulfilled. The BiOps and consultations are delayed and the territory and fishermen don't get proper justification on why it is delayed. He said all of this can be considered for the Equity and Environmental Justice plan presented. He then read a statement put together by the fishing industry to support American Samoa becoming a SID put together by DMWR and StarKist. The statement said that the tuna fishery is in danger of collapse due to how the tuna industry is managed. We can't allow the economy to lose the tuna industry from US flagged purse seiners which makes up 85% of the economy. Purse seiners are decreasing because of vessels changing flags to take advantage of less strict rules by other countries. The US needs to change its management to treat American Samoa as a SID. The local government is creating a license for the fleet that supports the government. It hopes to have it recognized by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission to get rid of the disproportionate burden.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

The American Samoa Advisory Panel made the following recommendations:

Regarding Territory BMUS:

- The American Samoa AP recommends the Council selects Option 2 to provide more flexibility in assessing the AS BF stock

Regarding American Samoa Fisheries:

- The American Samoa AP recommends the Council communicate concerns to the US regarding equity for American Samoa fisheries such as recognition by the WCPFC that American Samoa is a SID.

8. Other Business

Soliai agreed to provide an update on CARES Act funding via email to the AP.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:07 p.m.