

Council Proposes a New Pacific Strategy to Advance US Interests Through Fisheries

With China vying for greater influence in the Pacific, concerns over food security amid the current supply chain crisis and inflation, the importance of fisheries to the people of the Western Pacific Region has never been so apparent. Fisheries are critical to the welfare of Hawai'i, American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI). **The United States must act now to ensure the prosperity of the U.S. Pacific Islands and protect national influences by strengthening its positions in international fisheries negotiations.** Specifically, to improve negotiations within the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), where 60% of the global tuna supply is managed.

Following another disappointing outcome for the United States at the WCPFC annual meeting in December 2021, the Council recommended implementing a holistic approach to advancing U.S. fishery interests in the Pacific. Rather than having negotiations related to the WCPFC be limited to specific federal agencies, this objective should be incorporated into a broader overarching goal

for the United States, including geopolitical interests such as improving trade, food security, national security and ultimately, strengthened U.S. influence in the Pacific. The Council developed an informational paper outlining these needs that was distributed to the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, the Interior and State. Thus far, responses have been supportive, with some commitments to prioritize fisheries through cooperating with Pacific Island nations.

The Council's requests are timely. The Biden Administration launched its *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*¹ in February and in March requested public comments for the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF). The Council requested that advancing fisheries be included as an objective in the IPEF. Two of the objectives of the



Longline vessels in port at Pier 38, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Commercial fisheries for pelagic species like tuna brought in \$124.4 million in 2021.

overarching *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* are to "drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific" and to "partner to build resilience in the Pacific Islands." For Pacific Island nations and territories, fisheries are often the leading (and often the only) resource for national and territorial economic development. Fisheries are to the Pacific Islands as fossil fuels are for the Middle East, in terms of relative economic significance.

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New Pacific Strategy

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STORY ICON KEY

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But in order to get these goals and objectives achieved, immediate improvements are needed and the groundwork must be laid out at the WCPFC. Specifically, fishing opportunities for Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries need to be enhanced, and the U.S. Pacific Territories need to have their economic aspirations acknowledged.

For American Samoa, tuna fisheries contribute to one third of the total workforce, mostly through a StarKist cannery, and 90% of exports. American Samoa is supplied mostly by U.S.-flagged purse seiners that call Pago Pago home. However, these vessels are not recognized within the WCPFC as a distinct fleet, which would afford them benefits as a Small Island Developing State and Participating Territory (SIDS/PT). The situation makes it difficult for them to compete internationally and jeopardizes the existence of a "local" American Samoa fleet to supply the cannery. This poses a threat to the economy of American Samoa.



Longline fishing vessels in Pago Pago Harbor, American Samoa.

The Hawai'i longline fishery is the largest food producer for the State and supplies more than 60% of fresh yellowfin and bigeye tuna to U.S. markets, and leads the nation in swordfish production. The fishery is the most regulated of its kind in the world and is considered the "gold standard" in compliance and monitoring. Yet no good deed goes unpunished. The Hawai'i fishery has the lowest catch limit for bigeye tuna of limits set for six countries by the WCPFC. Several "distant-water" fleets, mostly from Asia, have catch limits several times higher. While the Hawai'i-based U.S. longline fishery exceeds monitoring (human observer coverage) and reporting requirements, and does not transship catch at sea, many of these competing fisheries barely meet or fail to meet these requirements each year.



Albacore tuna are the primary target species for the American Samoa longline fishery. Photo: Flickr.

The international playing field must be level for the United States within WCPFC fisheries management, particularly to ensure American Samoa's rights as a SIDS/PT are respected and acknowledged. The Hawai'i-based U.S. longline fishery needs to have catch limits that are proportional to its fishing capacity and incentivize compliance and monitoring. The current status quo and trajectory of U.S. fisheries negotiations in the Pacific may lead Hawai'i and the U.S. Territories into a precarious economic situation and/or jeopardize their ability to sustain local food security.

This situation can only be corrected by increased engagement with other Pacific Island nations, many of which form voting blocs and alliances within the WCPFC. Although the United States is the largest sponsor of foreign aid in the Pacific, there is lack of direct engagement with these nations on fisheries matters. As a result, many of these nations do not support U.S. interventions and proposals, while sometimes favoring other competing nations. American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI each have their own "seat at the table" along with the United States at WCPFC meetings and negotiations. The U.S. Pacific Territories, with adequate resources from the U.S. federal government, need to use shared commonalities and aspirations so that negotiations can be articulated with mutual cooperation with Pacific Island nations.

The greatest beneficiary of decreased U.S. engagement and influence is China. China is actively implementing a specific set of policies, programs and investments to expand its influence throughout the Pacific² specifically focusing on the fisheries sector. Such is the case in Kiribati, which is the closest foreign nation to Hawai'i, much closer than the continental United States. China has developed many infrastructure projects with