

## Fishermen's co-op takes stock after 'devastation'

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The 40-year-old Guam Fishermen's Co-op building in Hagåtña was ripped open by Typhoon Mawar like a can of sardines. The smell was even worse.

On a normal day, customers might be perusing the shop for fresh local seafood. On Tuesday, however, the front door of the facility, emblazoned with stickers from fishing charters and supportive local brands, was seen blown off. The sun shone in through a skylight that had been created, ripped into the roof of the shop, courtesy of the typhoon. Water was everywhere.

"I got power, to be honest, but I need to isolate these wires," said Manny Duenas, president of the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association. "I don't want somebody to be standing there and – bzzzzt!"

Duenas stood in the doorway of what used to be the fish-processing area of the building, as his staff worked to carry out whatever equipment could be salvaged. Mawar had done some of the heavy lifting, scattering pieces of equipment over the nearby streets.

"We already located maybe about 40% of our stuff," he said. "Just the big stuff now that we have to get. Our freezer blew off."

The control panel for the facility's 4,000-gallon fuel pump, which supplied the Gregorio D. Perez Marina, was wet and inoperable. About \$15,000 worth of product was ruined or lost during the storm, Duenas said, and has taken to boiling down whatever scraps remained to cope with the smell. He said he can't get anyone to pick up the garbage.

### **'I've never seen this much devastation'**

The co-op has seen better days. At one point, years ago, there were about 25 staff on hand, Duenas said. Now he has just four employees to do the heavy lifting, and "more than half (of them), they all lost their home. So we quit at 2 o'clock, so they can go do their home repair. And we help them as much as we can, but it's really rough for everybody right now."

The entirety of the already aging facility, which Duenas suspects was originally donated to the co-op by the military, will have to be demolished.

"We were in the top five of the Korean (tourist) places to visit. I didn't know that, until two operators said, 'Hey Manny, you guys are in the top five.' Top five of what? Hit Radio 100?" Duenas joked.

Things were starting to recover some after the hard days of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Mawar will set things back again. Duenas said he's had trouble getting federal aid for the co-op after the building was damaged in previous storms, and he isn't confident he'll get much now. He said no one in the local government has stopped by to offer any assistance.

"I've never seen this much devastation in my life," he said.

### **'Our intention is to keep it alive'**

About 60% of the members of the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative had large enough operations to sell directly to restaurants, Duenas said, and only came to him when they had a surplus. It's the small guys, he said, who fish to support their families, who will hurt while the co-op is offline.

It's getting ever more difficult to keep up the practice, he said, as fishers face higher costs and stricter regulations, and marine preserves that shut them out.

"Our intention is to keep it alive," Duenas said. "Because once we're gone, there's nothing to keep it going. Nothing. There's so many people, (like) the federal government, (who want) to take half our ocean away for marine protected areas."

A temporary container building nearby could serve as a new home for the co-op, but it was also damaged by Mawar and first will have to be repaired and renovated.

The container building was meant to house the co-op as it transitions into a new, permanent building, Duenas said, but the move was stymied due to renovation issues. A brand-new co-op building was originally expected to be finished by 2022, and millions of dollars had already been set aside for the construction he said.

"The problem is me, I'll be honest with you," he told The Guam Daily Post.

"I'm old, I'm sick, and I need to strategize my operation so I don't lose revenue. Because we live ... almost hand-to-mouth. And if I have to shut down for several weeks, that really hurts."

There's no timeline for when things will reopen, Duenas said, especially with his employees facing their own hardships at home. But Duenas said he does intend to keep things going.

"I'm so tired, but it's like cancer – either you got it, you're in remission, or you die," Duenas said, with a laugh.