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MANAGEMENT  
COUNCIL

## **FINAL Report of the American Samoa Archipelago FEP Advisory Panel Meeting**

Saturday, June 24, 2023

1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. (SST)

### **1. Welcome and Introductions**

Nathan Ilaoa, American Samoa Advisory Panel Vice Chair opened the meeting at 1:02 p.m. Members in attendance included Nonu Tuisamoa, Joe Hamby, Dustin Snow. Members absent include Jerome Ierome, Ray Tulafono and Joseph Faaita.

Others in attendance includes Zach Yamada, Joshua DeMello, Mark Fitchett, Amy Vandehey, Elysia Granger (Council Staff), Melissa Snover (NMFS PIRO PRD), Marlowe Sabater, Adam Ayers, Kirsten Leong, Marc Nadon (PIFSC), Manny Duenas (Guam Council member), Val Brown (ONMS), and Thomas Remington (Lynker Contractor).

### **2. Review of the Last AP Recommendations and Meeting**

Zach Yamada, Council staff, provided a review of the last AP recommendations from its meeting on February 28, 2023.

There was no discussion from the AP.

### **3. Feedback from the Fleet**

#### **A. AS Fishermen Observations**

The vice chair requested the AP members provide fishing observations from April to June 2023.

An AP member said there had been an increase of atulai along the west coast of Tutu'ila. Unfortunately, there have been many funerals lately, which means fishing is not allowed. He said anyone who breaks the rules will have to pay a fine.

Another AP member said that sport fishing has been hot, and they caught a 400-pound recently. There has been a regular supply for the local fish markets and the fish are there.

An AP member reported that atulai has been strong in the Manu'a islands since April. Fishers observed that atulai are found deeper. For the longline fishery, the catch has been slow. Within the reporting period, a longline vessel brought in bluefin tuna.

An AP member reported that the purse seine fishery has been steady, although most boats are focused on the high seas. He said the three-month FAD closure would start on July 1. He said the captains and owners might move from the Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission to the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission in light of the increased fishing regulations.

An AP member reported that the Department of Marine Wildlife Resources (DMWR) has deployed five fish aggregating devices (FADs) in the last quarter.

## **B. Advisory Panel Fishery Issues and Priorities**

The vice Chair asked AP members about fisheries issues and priorities.

An AP member reported that the first Super Alia should arrive in American Samoa in July 2023. Another member said they would need to wait and see what the plans are for the vessel.

Another AP member said the Council had discussed vocational training on technical skills to participate in the fishery, whether on the boat, cannery, or as a technician. He said there is an opportunity for the AP to support the Council's education and outreach program. Amy Vandehey, Council staff, said they are looking to train engineers to help with the limited number of boat technicians who can teach local students. The Council acknowledged that this type of training could be difficult for students to leave American Samoa and be away from home for long periods. The Education Committee will think of different avenues to provide technical courses at the high school level to build capacity.

An AP member asked if the Council could collaborate with local boat owners and captains who could take paid student interns to build capacity. He said this could be a close-to-home shorter internship rather than sending students to the States.

An AP member said the Department of Commerce had a super alia project to train fishers as a business incubator project. AP members said there is a need for a capacity-building program for local students. The capacity-building program would be an excellent opportunity for local college and high school students to be exposed to the fishery. Another member said this would be a good idea, and the Council could look at different partnerships to build capacity locally.

An AP member said ONMS pays interns for diving. There is a need to build the educational system and engage students early to allow kids to gain interest. There are different ways to look at it, and it depends on the lifestyle of the individuals. It should start with the isolated villages to see how they rely on the land and where it can be built up. There is a need to upkeep nature and balance life. American Samoa Power Authority has been working to incorporate this, but the issue is that people are money hungry rather than completing the project from start to end. The vocational system is nonexistent; if your role model is not doing that, then there is a low likelihood.

An AP member reported on the PRIA Sanctuary Designation public meeting. He said there was strong opposition to the sanctuary designation with a strong presence from Starkist Cannery workers.

Council staff report that the Council received a letter from the Office of National Marine Sanctuary (ONMS) with the goals and objectives, and they are proposing to expand the current monument, and the sanctuary will go beyond that. The Council did provide a letter on the notice of intent saying that this is not consistent with America the Beautiful and EEJ, and the issue is myopic. The Hawaii and American Samoa longline fishery already have to deal with high seas regulations that go above and beyond what was outlined in the Council's letter to the PRIA proposal.

An AP member asked if there is any way to weigh the comments from people locally compared to others that may not live here. Council staff said comments are not weighed based on residence, and the Council did voice their concerns, and a lot of information has already gone into the public. There was a request to extend the public comment period, but this was not allowed.

An AP member asked if the University of California Santa Barbara would provide comments since Pacific Remote Island Coalition included UCSB's report findings in the nomination package. Council staff said that their information was not for management and would not be providing comments on the designation process.

An AP member said this nomination was based on public opinion and this action was purely politics. Some want their legacy to live on with the closure, and some say these closures are not beneficial. They have looked at the data from the actual report. The data can be arbitrary, and the ONMS ignores the resourceful information on AIS notions.

An AP member asked if the Council had contacted the other regional fishery management council. Council staff said the Council Coordination Committee had been discussing sanctuaries and has been negatively affected by the Antiquities Act, although there is the EO 14008. The Western Pacific has already achieved this 30%, and we continue to hold that burden. There is ongoing work from the CCC ABM WG that Council staff can provide to the AP once it is complete.

#### **4. AS Fishery Issues and Activities**

##### **A. 2022 Annual SAFE Report – AS Module**

Thomas Remington, Lynker Contractor, presented the highlights of the 2022 American Samoa Archipelago and Pelagic Annual SAFE Reports covering the fishery performance of American Samoa fisheries modules, and the ecosystem considerations that potentially drive the fishery dynamics. Adam Ayers, PIFSC, presented the final narratives of the fisher observations that provided the qualitative description of the fisheries and the fishery environment from fisher points-of-view.

The AP thanked Remington for his report.

An AP questioned the observation of increased abundance of deep bottomfish at the markets. He said that he has never seen one of the species ever at the market.

##### **B. 2023 Benchmark AS Bottomfish Stock Assessment**

Marc Nadon, PIFSC, provided a report on the 2023 AS BF stock assessment. Following suggestions from the last assessment, they took their time and made sure that they looked at the data very close. PIFSC started the 2023 assessment in 2020 to fully assess the data for bottomfish. They held data workshop in American Samoa with the fishing community that provided feedback on the data before conducting the stock assessment. The workshops were used in fixing several data issues such as no Manu'a data from 2016 to 2021, species misidentification and species appearing and disappearing during the assessment period.

An AP member thank PIFSC for their hard work and for meeting with the community to create a better system for future assessments.

Another AP member said it was nice that the assessment matches what is going on in the water and in their coolers.

An AP asked if the removal of the overfished status would affect fishing pressure. Another AP member said there is no market for high end bottomfish. He said it would lead to increased fishing pressure if there was someone interested in exporting the fish.

### **C. Bottomfish Stock Assessment WPSAR Report**

Mark Fitchett, Council staff, provided a report on the review of the American Samoa bottomfish stock assessment. The WPSAR determined if the data were appropriate, then the assessment was properly applied. The AP reviewed the results in proportion to the Terms of Reference.

An AP member said that things feel right and endorsed the findings of the WPSAR.

### **D. Bottomfish Management Unit Species Revision**

Joshua DeMello provided an overview of options to refine the bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) complex to reflect the current state of the bottomfish fishery in American Samoa. The amendment will refine the current BMUS list from 11 to 13 species. This amendment would remove five shallow species as ecosystem species and seven non-MUS as BMUS. Revision of the species list also includes developing status determination criteria, essential fish habitat, monitoring and bycatch, annual catch limits, and consideration of fishing communities.

An AP member asked if the Council analyzed the BMUS revision in conjunction with the WPSAR report. Council staff said the analysis was done in parallel, and they will apply the revised list for the following benchmark assessment.

An AP member asked about the benefits of revising the BMUS list with the updated 2023 American Samoa BMUS stock assessment. Council staff, this action would frontload work to help with a better management on a long-term scale.

An AP member said that with the results of the new assessment, then Option 1 would be good to leave the fishery alone.

Another AP member said he would lean toward option 2 since the assessment shows that the fishery is not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. Other members agreed.

*Regarding the Bottomfish Management Unit Species Revision, the AS AP recommended Option 2 to review the current AS BMUS list from 11 species to 13 species to make it easier for management.*

### **E. Final Biological Opinion for the American Samoa Longline Fishery and Next Steps**

Melissa Snover, PIRO Protected Resources Division, provided an overview of the final Biological Opinion (BiOp) for the American Samoa longline (ASLL) fishery, including an overview of changes made since the Council's review of the drafts in March 2023. The final ASLL BiOp was issued on May 15, 2023.

Asuka Ishizaki, Council staff, reported that some of the RPMs, specifically the crew training may require regulatory implementation through the Council process. PIRO SFD, PRD, Council staff will coordinate with industry representatives on the implementation, and any regulatory requirements would go through the Council process.

An AP member asked if the management measure apply only for catch limits. Council staff said the primary conservation measure is the turtle mitigation where the gear needs to be at a certain depth to lower interactions and there are other requirements like the protected species workshops and logbook requirements.

An AP said there has been a listed 3,520 fish in the five year period and asked what the current catch of oceanic whitetip sharks for 2022 since there has been less effort from the American Samoa Longline fleet. Snover said there was limited information. Council staff said there was a total of 355 reported interaction 2022 compared to the yearly average of 704.

## **5. Research Priorities**

### **A. MSA Five-Year Research Priorities Review**

Marlowe Sabater, PIFSC, and Mark Fitchett, Council staff, provided a review of the revisions of the Council's MSA Five-Year Research Priorities Review. Unlike the 2018 plan, this plan linked priorities to specific management objectives and needs. SSC, Pelagic Plan Team members, and PIFSC/PIRO staff will have contributed to the plan development.

An AP member said fishing communities were centered around the PRIA sanctuary designation process and understanding the impacts on the fishery, especially since the industry is reliant. He said it is sad that the impact of politicians making money over the state of our territory.

An AP member said their concerns are the economics of the industry and the communities who rely on it. He hopes the longline and alia fleet will continue to grow. Without the longline and purse seine, there will be no market and will not be economical.

An AP member questioned why there is a reliance on buying American while the President's Administration continues to shut down the fishing industry. He said American Samoa is lucky since they have high-speed internet, and Washington needs to understand the current status of the island area, and they are feeling the impact.

***Regarding the Fishery Issues, the AS AP recommended the Council recommend NOAA conduct an economic study that considers the cumulative effects of a proposed National Marine Sanctuary on the American Samoa fishing community that may prohibit fishing in the entire U.S. EEZ of the Pacific Remote Islands***

*The AS AP recommended the Council work with the other regional fishery management councils to get their support to prevent further fishery closures in the Pacific Remote Island Areas.*

## **6. Other Business**

There was no other business

## **7. Public Comment**

Manny Duenas commended the AP on their discussion and said the American Samoa bottomfish fishery is very similar to the Marianas bottomfish program. He said when they did the otoliths samples, they send their samples to Australia where they said their fish grow twice as fast compared to the species in the Great Barrier Reef.

## **8. Discussion and Recommendations**

*Regarding capacity building the American Samoa AP will work with the Education Committee to look at different avenues of vocational training locally. This could include establishing internships on local vessels and creating educational programs for primary and secondary education.*

*Regarding the Bottomfish Management Unit Species Revision, the AS AP recommended Option 2 to review the current AS BMUS list from 11 species to 13 species to make it easier for management.*

*Regarding the Fishery Issues, the AS AP recommended the Council recommend NOAA conduct an economic study that considers the cumulative effects of a proposed National Marine Sanctuary on the American Samoa fishing community that may prohibit fishing in the entire U.S. EEZ of the Pacific Remote Islands*

*The AS AP recommended the Council work with the other regional fishery management councils to get their support to prevent further fishery closures in the Pacific Remote Island Areas.*

Meeting adjourned at 4:08 p.m.