



**150th Meeting of the Scientific and Statistical Committee
November 28-29, 2023
Web Conference**

FINAL REPORT

4. Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center Director Report

T. Todd Jones provided the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) Director's report. He highlighted the two MHI Deep 7 bottomfish fisher engagement meetings convened in advance of the upcoming Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review (WPSAR); the Highly Migratory Species Professional Specialty Group hosted by PIFSC and the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) in August; the Pacific Islands Region Fisheries Bycatch Review that culminated in a summit in August; the Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division (FRMD) improvements to monitoring and assessments at the domestic level with the Guam Fisher Engagement Summit and Marianas BioSampling Summit held in November; FRMD improvements to monitoring and assessments at the international level with updates on the International Billfish Biological Sampling (IBBS) program and the new peer (external)-review process through the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species (ISC); collaborative research results on the Central West Pacific Green Sea Turtle Connectivity; the 2023 Hawaiian Monk Seal field season highlights; updates to date on the ongoing 2023 Hawaiian Islands Cetacean and Ecosystem Assessment Survey (HICEAS); and updates on the RICHARD (Rainier Integrates Charting, Hydrography, and Reef Demographics) mission.

An SSC member asked if the Deep 7 bottomfish fisher engagement meetings have been accessible online and if the December meeting will be online. Jones stated that previous meetings were accessible online and that the future meeting is likely to be as well for greater inclusion.

An SSC member commended PIFSC for organizing the Deep 7 fishermen engagement meetings, and also asked if a report of the Bycatch Summit meeting is available to assist SSC's efforts in updating MSRA research priorities. Jones stated that there is a draft of the report he will share with the SSC by the end of the week of December 4.

SSC thanked Jones for his informative presentation.

5. Program Planning

A. Fishing Regulations for the Proposed Pacific Remote Island National Marine Sanctuary (Action Item)

Council staff presented options for developing fishing regulations for the proposed Pacific Remote Islands (PRI) National Marine Sanctuary. As part of the sanctuary designation process under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council was provided the opportunity to determine if fishing regulations were necessary and develop those regulations if appropriate. The SSC was asked to consider the existing fishing regulations in the PRI to advise the Council on whether they are comprehensive and if there is scientific justification for additional fishing regulations.

A recent PIFSC publication estimating the economic contributions of US commercial fishing in American Samoa¹ was provided to SSC members as new scientific information available, which highlights the economic impacts of potential future reductions in fishery landings in American Samoa.

SSC members recognized the opposition for prohibiting commercial fishing around the four islands within the proposed PRI National Marine Sanctuary from the community of American Samoa who fear broad negative economic impacts and have expressed concerns about the future viability of the cannery.

SSC members expressed concerns about negative unintended consequences associated with additional limits on fishing in the PRI. These might include lost future fishing opportunities, displacement of fleets into areas with potentially higher bycatch rates, reduced U.S. footprint in the region leading to increased risk of foreign fleet incursions, uncertainty associated with potential lost cultural benefits of fish from the PRI, and questions about the implications for future bio-sampling and tagging efforts.

SSC members expressed significant concerns about the equity and environmental justice (EEJ) implications that the proposed PRI National Marine Sanctuary and existing Marine National Monuments impose on the underserved communities of American Samoa and the broader Pacific Islands Region.

The SSC affirmed its previous recommendation from the 149th SSC meeting that existing fishing regulations are sufficient to meet the goals and objectives of the proposed Pacific Remote Islands National Marine Sanctuary. The SSC does not find scientific evidence to support additional fishing regulations.

B. Review of Council Research Priorities

Council staff presented updates to the Council's 2025-2029 research priorities under the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSRA). The MSRA requires that each Council develop a five-year research priorities document for fisheries, fisheries interactions, habitat and other areas of research that are necessary for management

¹ Hing Ling Chan. 2023. Economic Contributions of U.S. Commercial Fisheries in American Samoa. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-PIFSC-151, 35 p. doi:10.25923/x904-a830. Available online at: <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/55943>

purposes. The MSRA also directs the National Marine Fisheries Service and the regional science centers to consider these research priorities when developing their own research priorities and budgets within the region of the associated Council. An SSC working group provided some insight to revise MSRA Research priorities and PIFSC staff provided status updates on 2020-2024 priorities in the previous plan. MSRA Research Priorities are to be folded into the Council's five year plan for 2025-2029. Council staff also provided a timeline with a planned workshop to be held in February 2024. The new plan will be finalized by the Council in March 2024.

SSC discussion focused on alternative approaches to and the utility of ranking projects within the MSRA Research Priorities document.

Jones outlined the research prioritization process at PIFSC and suggested one approach could be to highlight PIFSC core projects within the priority document where other projects could be suitable for external partners and grants.

SSC members provided prioritization strategies employed by other Councils, and emphasized the importance of jurisdictional priorities being reflected in the final document. There were concerns expressed that the document be simple, and not be a long list of projects.

The SSC recommends a collaborative workshop between Council Staff, PIFSC, PIRO, and SSC members be convened to finalize and prioritize the MSRA 2025-2029 research priorities in line with proposed timelines.

C. Review of IRA Projects and Proposal

Council staff presented the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects to be included in the Council's IRA funding package, which is due on January 31, 2024. Funds must be directed to governance projects to develop and advance climate-related fisheries management and implementation efforts, and must be completed within the 3 year funding window. The Council is developing projects around four priorities: scenario planning; regulatory review; protected species; and community engagement and capacity-building.

SSC members highlighted the importance of coordinating the IRA proposal with the MSRA Research Priorities document process. SSC members expressed concerns associated with perceptions that might be associated with the numbered order of priorities, emphasizing that community engagement should not be the lowest priority. An SSC member advocated strongly for the scenario planning priority as the scope could be defined to address all four priorities as described in the proposal.

SSC members Biggs and Martell, as well as the existing SSC Working Group on Research Priorities (Camacho, Itano, Franklin, Kobayashi, Jones, Hospital and Severance) will work with staff intersessionally to provide further input towards the development of the final IRA funding package.

The SSC endorsed the priorities as developed by the Council in coordination with the NMFS and its advisory bodies.

D. 2024-2026 SSC Plan Development

Council staff provided an overview of the draft SSC plan for 2024-2026. The Plan has been updated by staff from the 2021-2023 version based on progress made on activities in the last plan, anticipated management actions, and anticipated focus on developing and implementing climate-ready management strategies. The Council will also be finalizing the IRA project proposals, Council's 5-year Program Plan, and MSRA Research Priorities for the March 2024 meeting, and staff plans to further refine the SSC plan to align with those planning efforts.

The SSC recommends that item 4g in the draft plan (Process Error to Inform Extrinsic Ecosystem Drivers) be removed or updated to align with the SSC National Standard 1 Technical Guidance Working Group recommendation.

E. Preparations for the 8th Scientific Coordination Subcommittee Workshop

Jim Lynch, SSC Chair provided an update on the preparations for the 8th Scientific Coordination Subcommittee (SCS8) Workshop scheduled for August 26-28, 2024. The SSC was asked to provide additional suggestions for keynote speakers and case-studies under the refined sub-themes, and to identify nominees for the WP SSC delegation to participate in the SCS8. Council staff noted that the WP SSC representatives on the Steering Committee conveyed this SSC's input on the subthemes provided at the last meeting, of which two have been incorporated into the workshop topics (focus on social science as one of the sub-themes and incorporating discussion on identifying flexibility needed for ABC control rule guidance and regulations into the introductory 'context setting' portion of the agenda).

SSC members expressed support for using the WPFMC P* and SEEM Processes as a case study for the upcoming SCS8 Workshop.

SSC members offered additional themes for workshop consideration, including regulatory framework assessments for aquaculture issues, and managing mixed fisheries. However, Council staff indicated that the main theme and three sub-themes have been approved and are not subject to revision.

SSC members interested in participating in the SCS8 Workshop were instructed to email their interest to Chair Lynch and Council staff (Asuka Ishizaki).

F. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

6. Island Fisheries

A. Guam Bottomfish Stock Assessment WPSAR Terms of Reference

Felipe Carvalho and Erin Bohaboy, PIFSC, presented the draft Terms of Reference (TOR) for the upcoming Guam bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) stock assessments. A WPSAR for the Guam BMUS stock assessment update is expected in February 2024, which will follow the same modeling platform as the 2019 benchmark stock assessment with some input improvements and five years of additional data. A data review WPSAR for a Guam BMUS benchmark stock assessment is also expected in July 2024. This data review will identify which data may be used in the next benchmark stock assessment, and this will determine the type of assessment(s) that will be done, and allow PIFSC to identify a timeframe for completion of the next benchmark assessment. The WPSAR TORs for both reviews were presented, and the SSC was asked to endorse the TOR and select a chair and two panelists for the stock assessment update WPSAR at this meeting. The SSC was asked for feedback on the data WPSAR TOR by February 2024, and will review the TOR for endorsement at its March meeting.

An SSC member asked about the lack of size information in the upcoming assessment. Carvalho clarified that an assessment update has to use the same data as the prior benchmark assessment, which excludes the size data in this situation, but that a subsequent benchmark assessment could incorporate size data depending on results from the data WPSAR. An SSC member asked about the stock status from the last assessment and whether WPSAR/CIE review is typical in assessment updates. Carvalho noted the 2019 benchmark assessment found the Guam bottomfish stock to be overfished but no overfishing and added that WPSAR is used for assessment updates, however the panel is made up of SSC members and does not include CIE. The SSC member also inquired about the specific reasoning for the timeline (delayed) and product delivery (update vs. benchmark) modifications. Carvalho responded that there are preliminary indications of serious data issues when assessing as single species, thus necessitating the data WPSAR prior to a new benchmark assessment.

The SSC endorsed the WPSAR TOR for the February 2024 Guam BMUS stock assessment update, and nominated Chaloupka (chair), Camacho and Itano to serve on the WPSAR panel.

The SSC thanked Carvalho and Bohaboy for their presentation.

B. Hawaii FEP Uku Essential Fish Habitat Revision Amendment (Action Item)

Thomas Remington, Lynker/Council contractor, presented the draft Hawaii Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) Uku Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Revision Amendment. Uku EFH is currently described in the Hawaii FEP for all life stages, and most recent (2016) revision designated shallow water EFH from the shore to 240 m depth. Two new models that describe uku habitat that have passed WPSAR are now available to refine EFH for this species. The two models are the Level 1 (presence-absence) model developed by Franklin (2021) and Level 2 (density) model developed by Tanaka et al. (2022). The SSC at the 145th meeting in September determined that both models are considered best scientific information available (BSIA). At the time of the Council's initial action to refine EFH, the SSC at the 148th meeting in June 2023 recommended utilizing a single model approach, focusing on the Level 1 information.

The alternatives were refined since the initial action, removing the alternative that would designate EFH solely based on Level 2 model information, and removing an alternative that would designate EFH based on the average of Level 1, Level 2, and CPUE model information. The remaining action alternatives under consideration for final action would update the EFH descriptions and maps for subadult and adult uku in the MHI using BSIA. Sub-alternative 2a would update the EFH based on presence-absence model outputs from 0 to 300 m supplemented by information from relevant literature (preliminary preferred), and Sub-alternative 2b would update the EFH using density model outputs from 0 to 30 m and presence-absence model outputs from 30 to 300 m, supplemented by information from relevant literature.

An SSC member asked if the no-action alternative 1 is a viable alternative. Remington responded that the BSIA designations for the 2 uku EFH analyses now require that both of these analyses be used in EFH designation. The SSC member also asked for more information about alternative 2b, since NOAA General Counsel concerns preclude alternative 2a. Remington responded that alternative 2a is still on the table, but would need sound scientific justification for the exclusion of Level 2 data provided to NOAA General Counsel. Remington clarified that alternative 2b has not been previously discussed at prior SSC meetings. An SSC member questioned the value of this lengthy exercise given its negligible impact to anything. Council staff and Remington responded that EFH is often referenced in Hawaii for a variety of development projects, and that this model-based approach for EFH designation is a notable improvement to the usual qualitative, descriptive definitions of EFH. An SSC member reminded the SSC that the original WPSAR recommendation of the 2 uku EFH approaches recommended that only the Level 1 results be used as it provided EFH estimates throughout the depth range of the species.

An SSC member reiterated that prior SSC discussions primarily focused on the alternative(s) which combined 3 data sources (Level 1, Level 2, and CPUE) in an undesirable ad-hoc manner, and noted that the alternative 2b being posed here was not presented before (presented as an undesirable average vs. a more palatable overlay). An SSC member questioned why Pearl Harbor is still considered uku EFH. Kisei Tanaka, PIFSC staff responsible for the Level 2 density-based model, clarified why the modeling approach causes Pearl Harbor to be included and suggested a simple expert-based masking approach could resolve this. Justin Suca, PIFSC staff responsible for the additional modeling overlays of presence-absence and density coupled with uncertainty estimates, clarified that survey coverage of embayments, such as Pearl Harbor, were limited noting the under-representation of these habitats could be the basis for the general exclusion of embayments from model predictions.

The SSC recommends alternative 2b for uku EFH designation as it uses both sources of BSIA.

SSC member Franklin recused himself from any deliberation and recommendation on this agenda item.

C. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

7. Pelagic and International Fisheries

A. Multi-year Territorial Bigeye Tuna Catch Limit and Allocation Specification (Action Item)

Council staff presented alternatives for specifying catch and/or allocation limits for bigeye tuna from U.S. Participating Territories (American Samoa, Guam, and CNMI) to Hawaii-permitted U.S. longline vessels for 2025 and 2026. This specification would be implemented under a multi-year process recommended by the Council in 2018 (Pelagic FEP Amendment 11), modified from the current single year specification framework. Amendment 11 and the Council's previous recommendations on multi-year specifications for 2021-2023 had not yet been implemented due to a new stock assessment for bigeye tuna that was pending, as well as the delayed completion of the ESA Biological Opinion for the Hawaii deep-set and American Samoa longline fisheries. Staff presented scientific information on the bigeye tuna stock. Bigeye tuna comprises a Pacific-wide population that is internationally managed and assessed as separate stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) and Eastern Pacific Ocean by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, respectively. The Current WCPFC conservation and management measure (CMM) 2021-01, which sets a longline catch limit of bigeye tuna at 3,554 metric tons (mt), will expire at the end of 2023 with a possibility of new catch limits for fishery sectors and flag states under the WCPFC. The August 2023 WCPO bigeye tuna stock assessment indicates the stock is not subject to overfishing, nor overfished, and the stock is about 35% unfished biomass. In September 2023, the SPC provided future stock projection analyses showing that significant increases in bigeye catch, relative to recent 2019-2021 levels, could occur over the next 30 years without significant overfishing risk. The Council will consider catch and allocation limits for 2025 and 2026, noting a stock assessment is expected in 2026.

The SSC concurred that the WCPO bigeye tuna stock is not subject to overfishing and there is little conservation risk associated with the catch and allocation limit alternatives presented. The SSC acknowledged that the Council needs to move forward with a multi-year specification to reduce the unnecessary administrative burden associated with annually updating the specification process. The SSC also noted that there had been serious disruptions to fleet operations and the supply chain when there were administrative delays in the past. The SSC further noted that longline catch limits on the US participating territories had previously raised the important issues of EEJ.

The SSC concludes that the best available scientific information supports the conservation and management objectives in order for the Council to proceed with moving forward with multi-year territorial bigeye tuna catch and allocation limit specifications for 2025 to 2026.

B. Public Comment

There was no public comment.