# PACIFIC ISLANDS FISHERY NEWS

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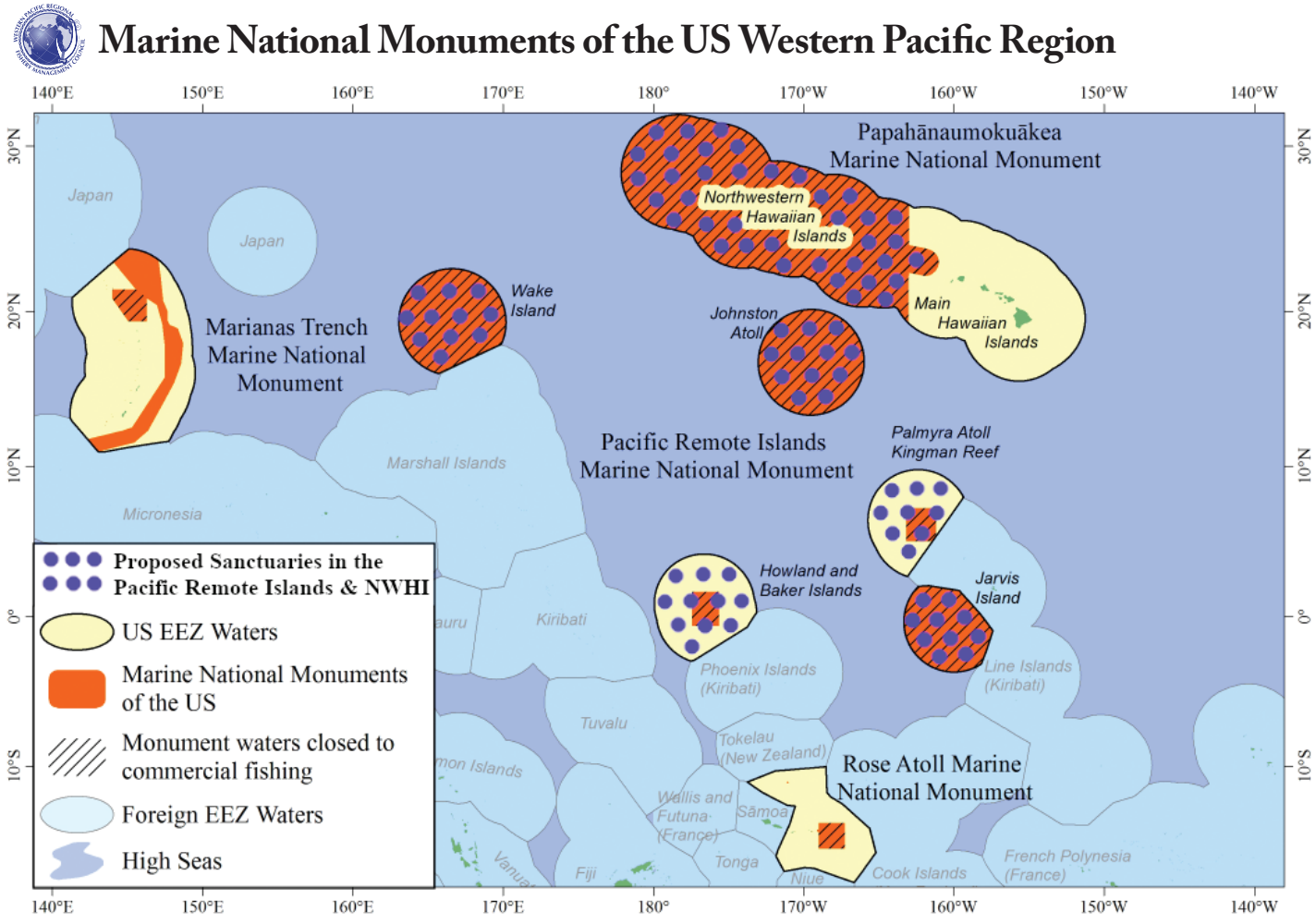
## Navigating the Choppy Waters of the Sanctuary Designation and Fishery Impacts




**Existing fishing regulations** which govern the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the U.S. Pacific Remote Islands (PRI) may be sufficient for the proposed national marine sanctuary, said the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council at its September meeting in Honolulu. The Council reviewed data on current fishing in the PRI and the multitude of fishing regulations that govern the area. It concluded that the regulatory scheme in place may already satisfy the proposed goals and objectives presented by NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS).

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# Sanctuary Designation and Fishery Impacts

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The current fishing regulations in the PRI are primarily governed by the Council's Pacific Remote Island Areas and Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plans (FEPs). FEP regulations include provisions that prohibit destructive fishing practices like bottom trawling and the use of explosives, establish no-take restricted areas, minimize interactions with protected species and impose limits on catch and effort. While noncommercial and recreational fishing is allowed within 3 to 200 nautical miles around each island, commercial fishing is restricted to a 50-200 nautical mile range in the U.S. EEZ around Howland and Baker Islands, Palmyra Atoll and Kingman Reef due to existing Marine National Monuments.

The new sanctuary as proposed would overlay the current Monument boundaries and extend the fishing regulations, including a prohibition on commercial fishing, to cover the full extent of the U.S. EEZ around the PRI. However, overlaying the Monument is duplicative. Two federal management regimes in the U.S. Pacific Islands is a terrible waste of taxpayers' hard-earned income. See the Summer 2022 and Fall 2022 issues of *Pacific Islands Fishery News* for articles on the proposed sanctuary in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which overlaps the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Scientists from the NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center presented data indicating that fishing in the PRI has a minimal impact on tuna stocks. The catch in the PRI accounts for less than 1% of the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for skipjack and yellowfin tuna and only 3.5% of the MSY for bigeye tuna. More importantly, the stocks of these tuna species are neither overfished nor subject to overfishing. While fishing has declined due to the establishment and expansion of the PRI Marine National Monument, the fishing that does occur is significant for the commercial tuna fishing industry.

Furthermore, assessments based on Endangered Species Act biological opinions by NOAA determined that current regulations for U.S. purse seine and longline fisheries do not threaten the continued existence of any protected species. Fishery impacts on protected species have been low and efforts are ongoing to further reduce interactions and impacts on these species, particularly by the longline fishery.

Fishing activities that do or are likely to occur in the PRI, such as trolling, longlining and purse seining, operate at relatively shallow depths and far from the ocean's bottom, minimizing their impact on the marine ecosystem services and biodiversity of concern. These activities do not affect sensitive coral reef habitats or deep demersal (bottom-dwelling) reef communities, which are essential for ecosystem health. In

essence, the argument for sanctuary designation, which includes the protection of critical habitats, is redundant, as it is already addressed by existing regulations.

"The current fishing effort in the PRI will not affect the habitat or species that a sanctuary may be concerned about - the data shows that," said Taotasi Archie Soliai, Council vice chair from American Samoa.

Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds noted, "The discussion so far has been on the process. The bigger picture is that the United States is managing U.S. fisheries in our region with monuments and sanctuaries. It is federal overreach."

## Community Engagement

Crucial discussions were held at a workshop hosted jointly by the American Samoa Government (ASG) and ONMS, on Sept. 12-23, 2023, in response to massive pushback to the proposed PRI sanctuary from the local community. The Rex Lee Auditorium was filled with a discernible sense of urgency and commitment to finding a resolution.

A diverse group of stakeholders, including federal and territorial partners, Senate and House leaders, and members of the public, came together to engage in earnest discussions regarding the potential impacts of the proposed sanctuary designation on the local economy. Representatives from various ASG departments presented on potential impacts analyzed by the Governor's Office, Department of Commerce, American Samoa Power Authority (ASPA), Attorney General's Office, Port Authority and Shipyard Authority.

One of the major concerns raised during the workshop was the fate of U.S. purse seine vessels. If the sanctuary designation is implemented, these vessels would be unable to fish in the PRI, which would push them to travel farther afield. This would result in complications for offloading in American Samoa, rendering it unviable. As a consequence, these vessels would need to offload in other locations, putting further pressure on the cannery's viability.

ASG departments showed economic factors that would be affected if the StarKist Samoa cannery, the largest employer in the territory, were to cease operations. A cannery shutdown is likely to occur if the PRI sanctuary prohibits commercial fishing and the implications are far-reaching, with both direct and indirect consequences that would adversely impact the people of American Samoa.

The StarKist cannery's pivotal role in the American Samoa economy cannot be overstated. It serves as the largest employer in the territory, providing livelihoods for countless individuals, both directly and indirectly associated with its operations. For American Samoa, the tuna industry provides jobs, food security and cultural connections that are irreplaceable.

ASPA reported the cannery plays a vital role in subsidizing the economy through its utility usage. This underscores the broader impact of the cannery's operations on the overall well-being of the territory. In 2022, the StarKist cannery contributed more than $7 million in electric revenue. When the Chicken of the Sea cannery

closed in 2009, ASPA took a hit of more than $5 million per year. This closure led to a loss of more than 2,000 jobs, causing a negative ripple effect throughout the local economy. In addition to economic losses, there were societal issues such as challenges to physical and mental health and the exodus of people from the region.

Pacific Energy, a key player in the region, also highlighted its substantial contributions to both ASPA and the U.S. purse seine fleet. Notable decreases in activity were seen following

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| Date | Focus | Area Names | Size (sq. nautical miles) | Federal Regulations Code/ Presidential Proclamation | Prohibitions/ Restrictions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1983 | Habitat and Vulnerable Species | Hawai'i Precious Coral Conditional Beds and Refugia | ~40 | 50 CFR § 665.261 | Precious corals |
| 1986 | Habitat | Hancock Seamount Bottomfish/Groundfish Prohibited Area | 17,735 | 50 CFR § 665.202 | Bottomfishing and Groundfish fishing |
| 1986 | Habitat, Vulnerable Species, and Biodiversity | Western Pacific Region Total Prohibition on 'Destructive' Gears | 1,692,082 | 50 CFR § 600.725(v) | Drift gillnets, dredges, trawls, poison, traps |
| 1991 | Habitat, Vulnerable Species, and Biodiversity | Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Protected Species Zone and Longline Prohibited Area | 102,493 | 50 CFR § 665.806(a)(2) | Pelagic longline gears |
| 1992 | Habitat, Vulnerable Species, and Biodiversity | Guam Longline Prohibited Area | 14,634 | 50 CFR § 665.806(a)(3) | Pelagic longline gears |
| 1992 | Habitat, Vulnerable Species, and Biodiversity | Main Hawaiian Islands Longline Prohibited Area | 72,504 | 50 CFR § 665.806(a)(2) | Pelagic longline gears |
| 2004 | Habitat | Guam-No-Anchor Zone | 38,679 | 50 CFR § 665.399 | Large vessels, bottomfishing gears |
| 2006 | Habitat | Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM) | 105,592 | Proclamation 8031 and Proclamation 8112 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |
| 2009 | Habitat and Vulnerable Species | Marianas Trench MNM | 72,067 | Proclamation 8335 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |
| 2009 | Habitat | Pacific Remote Islands (PRI) MNM - Johnston, Jarvis, Palmyra and Kingman | 65,610 | Proclamation 8336 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |
| 2009 | Habitat and Vulnerable Species | Rose Atoll MNM | 10,146 | Proclamation 8337 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |
| 2011 | Small Vessel and Indigenous Fishery Performance | American Samoa Large Vessel Prohibited Area | 3,241 | 50 CFR § 665.806(b)(1) | Pelagic longline vessels >50 ft |
| 2011 | Vulnerable Species | Guam Longline Prohibited Area and Large Vessel Exclusion Zone | 14,642 | 50 CFR § 665.806(a)(3) | All vessels >50 ft, pelagic longline, large bottomfish vessels |
| 2011 | Habitat, Vulnerable Species, and Biodiversity | Northern Mariana Islands Longline Prohibited Area | 25,690 | 50 CFR § 665.806(a)(4) | Pelagic longline gears |
| 2012 | Vulnerable Species | Southern Exclusion Zone (south of Hawai'i, triggered by Take Reduction Team for false killer whales) | 100,066 | 50 CFR § 229.37(d) | Pelagic longline gears |
| 2014 | Habitat | PRIMNM Expansion | 307,641 | Proclamation 9173 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |
| 2016 | Habitat | PMNM Expansion | 334,024 | Proclamation 9478 | All fishing gears, indigenous exemptions |

*The evolution of U.S. EEZ regulated fishing areas in the Western Pacific Region through the Magnuson-Stevens Act, or by Presidential Proclamation through the Antiquities Act. The Council has used time-area closures for many years as a fishery management tool to help increase fish populations and protect vulnerable species. The MSA's adaptive and iterative 'bottom-up' process provides the opportunity for stakeholder input on area-based management. In contrast, monuments are created through a top-down approach and no consultation with local communities or basis in the best available science. The Council has argued that the monument areas are too large and have resulted in negative economic impacts for the U.S. fishing industries and local communities. The areas were already healthy and sustainably managed by the Council. Yellow areas indicates actions taken by the Council.*

## Sanctuary Designation and Fishery Impacts CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

the closure of other canneries in the past. In 1998, an impressive $20 million worth of marine diesel fuel was sold to the purse seine fleet, which comprised around 40 vessels at that time. In 2023, that number has dwindled to 11 purse seine vessels remaining, resulting in a reduction in fuel sales of about $6 million.

Emotions spilled over as presenters and participants provided information, personal stories and even song. "Our people are passionate. Not that we can't be angry, we have those negative emotions as well but what you saw was passion about how it will impact the economy," said Soliai, who is also the director of the American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources, at the September Council meeting.

### Where the Sanctuary Designation Process Began

In January 2021, President Joe Biden unveiled his vision for a more environmentally sustainable United States with the signing of Executive Order 14008, known as "America the Beautiful." One key aspect of this vision is to conserve and restore at least 30% of the country's lands and waters by 2030. To meet this ambitious goal, President Biden directed the Secretary of Commerce on March 21, 2023, to explore the establishment of a new national marine sanctuary around the PRI. This action is intended to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems, but it has also sparked intense discussions on the potential impacts, particularly on those that depend on fisheries in the PRI.

Sanctuary designation started with a Notice of Intent published in the *Federal Register* on April 18, 2023. It prompted passionate public participation and feedback, with a significant emphasis on the views of American Samoa, where the proposed sanctuary would largely affect.

The journey towards establishing the PRI National Marine Sanctuary is a complex and intricate one, striking a balance between conserving our oceans and safeguarding the economies and traditions of the communities that rely on them. The Council has until Dec. 20, 2023, to make its final recommendations and decisions. As this critical decision approaches, we invite you to stay informed by visiting the Council's website at *www.wpcouncil.org* for updates and insights.

Scientists from the NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center presented data indicating that fishing in the PRI has a minimal impact on tuna stocks. The catch in the PRI accounts for less than 1% of the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for skipjack and yellowfin tuna and only 3.5% of the MSY for bigeye tuna. More importantly, the stocks of these tuna species are neither overfished nor subject to overfishing.

### New NOAA Report on American Samoa Fisheries Available

The NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center released a report in November 2023 on the "Economic Contributions of U.S. Commercial Fisheries in American Samoa." The report quantifies revenue from fish landed in the territory in terms of employment, economic output, gross domestic product and labor income. The research also acknowledges that commercial fisheries in American Samoa face numerous challenges and reductions in commercial fishery revenues can result in broad economic impacts to the community of American Samoa. This study evaluates hypothetical reductions of 10%, 30% and 50% in U.S. commercial landings in American Samoa and examines the potential economic impacts of these changes to the American Samoa economy. ***https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/55943***

# Council Seeks a Fair and Balanced Longline Catch Limit for Hawai'i and Recognition of American Samoa to Be Afforded Privileges of Small Islands

**The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council** and the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) convened an informal meeting Sept. 28, 2023, to consider longline fishery management components of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) conservation and management measure (CMM) for tropical tunas. The WCPFC is responsible for the international management of tunas in the western and central Pacific, including more than 80% of the tuna production coming from the Hawai'i longline fishery.

Meeting participants discussed the need to include monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) provisions in developing any future CMM, among other topics. This point is important because the Hawai'i longline fishery has the highest level of observer coverage and utilizes electronic reporting, while setting a gold standard for MCS. The fleet also does not engage in transshipment, or the transferring of catch or seafood from fishing vessels at sea to larger carrier vessels, which has been associated with concerns such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, human rights issues, and data gaps and accountability.

Following the Council's informal workshop was a formal WCPFC workshop held Sept. 29-30, 2023, that addressed not only longline fishing, but also purse seine fishing, which is critical for American Samoa. Longline fisheries are managed through catch as the 'management currency,' while fishing effort (days) are managed for purse seine fisheries. Longline fisheries target bigeye and yellowfin tunas, and purse seiners target skipjack tuna—the primary species used in canned tuna.

Much like the recent workshop, in April the Council and MIMRA organized an informal workshop in Honolulu that recognized the western and central Pacific bigeye tuna stock status should allow for consideration of increases in catch limits (see Table 1). The current CMM, which covers nearly 60% of global tuna supply, expires at the end of 2023 and may be revised in December at the WCPFC annual meeting. According to the informal workshops, any increase in longline fishing opportunities would need to be balanced with a commensurate purse seine fishing effort increase.

**Western & Central Pacific Bigeye Tuna Longline 2021 Catch and 2021 Annual Catch Limits**

Adopted by the WCPFC in 2018 and applicable through the end of 2023

| Commission Country Member | 2021 Catch (metric ton) | 2021 Annual Catch Limit (metric ton) |
|---|---|---|
| Japan | 9,465 | 17,765 |
| Korea | 13,708 | 13,942 |
| Chinese Taipei | 7,486 | 10,481 |
| China | 5,492 | 8,724 |
| Indonesia | 118 | 5,889 |
| USA | 3,533 | 3,554 |
| Australia | 290 | 2,000 |
| New Zealand | 67 | 2,000 |
| Philippines | 0 | 2,000 |
| European Union | 40 | 2,000 |
| Small Island Developing States & Participating Territories | N/A | No Limit |

Source: WCPFC19-2022-IP03

*Table 1. Data taken from the WCPFC conservation and management measure for tropical tunas (CMM 2021-01), which expires at the end of 2023.*

Scientific information presented at both the informal longline workshop and formal WCPFC workshop in September included two new stock assessments for bigeye and yellowfin tunas by the WCPFC science provider, the Pacific Community (SPC). These assessments, while less optimistic than previous ones, still show stock biomass levels at nearly double those associated with an overfished stock, and fishing mortality rates are below those associated with overfishing. It is important to note that longline fisheries target larger adult fish, while purse seine fisheries target skipjack, but incidentally catch smaller juvenile bigeye tuna. Historically, the WCPFC Scientific Committee has recognized the relatively higher impact of purse seine fisheries on the stock. However, these purse seine fisheries are economically significant, worth

| Future bigeye tuna longline catch (mt) | Longline catch scalar* relative to 2019-21 average of 58,250 mt | Resulting bigeye tuna stock depletion (SB/SBF=0), proportion of unfished biomass | | Equivalent purse seine effort scalar (and approx. total FAD closure duration) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Recent recruitment (%) | Long-term recruitment (%) | Recent recruitment | Long-term recruitment |
| 65,000 | 1.16 | 43 | 40 | 1.2 (1.6) | 1.25 (1.2) |
| 71,000 | 1.25 | 42 | 39 | 1.3 (0.7) | 1.35 (0.3) |
| 77,000 | 1.37 | 40 | 37 | 1.5 (0) | 1.55 (0) |
| 83.000 | 1.48 | 39 | 35 | 1.65 (0) | 1.8 (0) |
| 89,000 | 1.59 | 37 | 33 | 1.9 (0) | >2 (0) |
| 95,000 | 1.69 | 36 | 32 | >2 (0) | >2 (0) |
| 101,000 | 1.80 | 34 | 30 | >2 (0) | >2 (0) |
| 107,000 | 1.91 | 33 | 28 | >2 (0) | >2 (0) |

*Table 2. The table shows information provided by SPC to the WCPFC Tropical Tuna Workshop. It includes different scenarios for how much bigeye tuna are caught by longline fishing, along with changes in purse seine fishing efforts. The table also provides predictions for how these scenarios might affect the tuna population over 30 years, considering 'recent' and 'long-term' recruitment assumptions. The shaded scenarios show when the tuna population might drop below the target levels set for 2012-2015 (34%). Source: WCPFC-TTMW4-2023-04. *Note: a scalar is a proportional change.*

billions of dollars annually, and particularly vital for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that rely on the income generated from licensing and access to their tuna-rich waters. The WCPFC has long sought to balance purse seine and longline fisheries.

The new SPC stock projections indicate that both longline and purse seine fishing can increase without harming the stock, compared to the 2019-2021 levels (see Table 2). Longline bigeye tuna catches during those years have been steady (~58,000 mt), and even if they increase to 95,000 mt under the commonly accepted 'recent recruitment' scenario or 83,000 mt under the more conservative 'long-term recruitment' scenario, they would remain above the target biomass levels. This means there's significant room for more longline fishing without risking overfishing. Scientific information shows that an increased U.S. quota for the Hawai'i-based longline fishery can easily be achieved, while simultaneously providing more purse seine fishing opportunities for Pacific Island countries. The 'win-win' case has been made.

However, politics often take precedence over science in these negotiations. While science can be used to support positions, there are other countries with their own expectations. For instance, Japan relies on a pole and line fishery for skipjack and may want to reduce fishing pressure to support this fishery. They might also seek provisions for increased catches of other species like bluefin tuna. However, the majority of nations, including those with catch limits in Table 1 and Pacific Island nations, aim for increased fishing in either longline or purse seine, or both.

The inequity faced by the Hawai'i longline fishery has resonated with several WCPFC members, including those from Taiwan, Korea and many Pacific Island states, who recognize the virtues of the fleet as a leader in conservation. The Council has maintained for many years that the Hawai'i longline fishery deserves an increase of 3,000 mt from its current longline catch limit of 3,554 mt. The fishery has the lowest catch limit of those in Table 1 and must rely on territorial agreements with the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa and Guam in order to maintain its supply throughout the fishing year. Furthermore, not all members utilize their full allotted catch limit, leaving thousands of metric tons of bigeye tuna 'on the table.' At the WCPFC annual meeting in the Cook Islands in December 2023, the Hawai'i longline fishery anticipates an increase in catch limit for the U.S. fishery.

## Restrictions to Domestic US Waters Are Not Independent of International Limits on the High Seas

Another outcome of the Council's informal workshops is the recognition that domestic management of its own exclusive economic zones (EEZs) should be considered in balancing limits for longline fishing, both on the high seas and within these zones. This is critical because the WCPFC often aims to restrict high seas fishing, claiming it removes responsibilities of members to do a better job monitoring fishing and limits revenue to SIDS. Many WCPFC members rely on access fees for fishing within the Pacific Island EEZs. However, the U.S. Hawai'i'-based longline fishery and American Samoa-based purse seine fishery must rely heavily on fishing on the high seas. Most of the U.S. Pacific waters are off-limits for commercial fishing due to marine national monuments and a possible sanctuary, which limits opportunities for U.S. fisheries. The Hawai'i fishery operates with smaller vessels (regulations limit them to 101 feet or less), unable to venture far enough to access other countries' EEZs. Also, as a fresh ice-chilled fishery, it cannot undertake extended trips and still maintain the freshness of its products for the Hawai'i market.

The U.S.-flagged purse seine fishery must either pay exorbitant fees to fish in foreign waters or fish in the limited U.S. waters left unaffected by marine national monuments or sanctuaries. Furthermore, anticipated regulations from the National Marine Fisheries Service may divide total fishing limits in the Effort Limit Area for Purse Seine Fisheries (ELAPS) between high seas limits and the U.S. EEZ. If a new sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Islands prohibits commercial fishing around all islands, the limit in the U.S. EEZ would be meaningless. In addition, fishing on the high seas could potentially be limited through the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), which was adopted earlier this year. Such a culmination of policies at loggerheads with sustainable fisheries could cripple American Samoa's fishery and economy.

## America Samoa Seeks Privileges for SIDS and Participating Territories

The plight of American Samoa was heard loud and clear at the formal WCPFC workshop. Council member Taotasi Archie Soliai from American Samoa made an impassioned plea to WCPFC members, particularly fellow Pacific Islanders, to recognize fishing vessels that are integral to the territory's economy to be granted privileges given to SIDS and Participating Territories under the WCPFC Convention. These privileges would include some exemptions from high seas limits and seasonal fish aggregating device (FAD) closures.

Addressing the Commission, Soliai said, "The highest priority for American Samoa is to gain full recognition of the disproportionate burden we have borne as a SIDS / Participating Territory, and to maintain a reliable supply of tuna for processing in our one remaining cannery."

Securing the support and acknowledgment of other Pacific Island nations is critical for American Samoa, given the cultural ties they share. Many of these nations receive U.S. aid, including a substantial $600 million economic assistance commitment from the Biden Administration. American Samoa contends that it requires U.S. government assistance primarily to protect its most vital economic resource: its fisheries. The continued operation of the cannery in American Samoa depends on the unhindered fishing access and optimal operation of U.S. purse seine vessels. Despite the challenges posed by international and domestic constraints, Soliai remains optimistic.

# Got Tags? SPC Wants YOU to Play an Active Part in Fishery Management

*Note – This is a guest article from Dave Itano (Fisheries Consultant, SPC tag recovery officer/Hawai'i) and Jeff Muir (SPC).*

**The Pacific Community (SPC)** Oceanic Fisheries Programme is the designated science provider for the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) conducting research and in particular the stock assessments of key tuna and non-target species harvested by WCPFC fisheries. A critical data input to the stock assessments comes from tagging studies using simple plastic dart tags or computerized archival (data logging) and transmitter tags. The SPC has been fielding large scale tagging studies since the 1970s to monitor the movement, growth, habitat use and catch rates by fishery of key tuna and bycatch species. Chartered pole-and-line boats have traditionally been used to mass tag thousands of tropical tuna across the western Pacific on vessels capable of tagging and releasing more than 4,000 tuna in good condition in a single day.


A separate Central Pacific Tagging Program has been concentrating on tagging bigeye tuna in a bigeye-rich region of the central equatorial Pacific mainly around the Line and Phoenix Islands of Kiribati, more than a thousand miles south and southwest of Hawai'i. Since its inception in 2008, this program has released 69,654 tagged tuna and collected thousands of biosamples over the course of 16 research cruises. The initial Central Pacific tagging cruise in 2008 was conducted on the Honolulu-based *FV Double D* and relied on tagging bigeye tuna schools found aggregated at the Tropical Atmosphere Ocean (TAO) oceanographic buoys close to the equator. These buoys are known to attract and hold large schools of bigeye, yellowfin and skipjack tuna, thus acting like a deep-sea anchored fish aggregating device (FAD).

The captains and vessels used for these cruises were recruited from a unique bigeye fishery centered on the Cross Seamount in Hawaiian waters that uses a variety of troll and handline gears in combination with 'danglers,' which is a gear type invented by the Cross Seamount fishery. Dangler gear uses very short handlines with large plastic squid lures that are suspended from sturdy stanchions with the lures just touching the surface of the water. Hooked tuna can quickly be flipped onto the boat for tagging. Dangler gear makes it possible to tag and release hundreds of tuna in good condition in a very short time. Trolling, handlining and jigging metal lures is much slower and labor intensive, but can be very effective in targeting bigeye and yellowfin for tagging and release.

In August-September 2023, the SPC conducted its 16th Central Pacific tagging cruise on the Hawai'i longline *FV Gutsy Lady 4*. Cruise leader Jeff Muir lead the expedition with veteran Cross Seamount fisherman Tim Jones at the helm. CP16 spent 45 days at sea and in 37 of those days were able to tag 11,296 tuna—a record for any of the 16 CP cruises! The cruise operated in the exclusive economic zone of the Line Islands, Palmyra and surrounding international waters.

Over the 16 years of Central Pacific cruises, the fishing and tagging strategy has evolved significantly. The purse seine fishery now relies on drifting FADs that use satellite-linked buoys equipped with echo sounders that can provide estimates of tuna school size and species to the fishing vessels. The U.S. tuna purse seine industry and other fleets have provided access to their dFADs and buoy information to benefit the SPC tagging cruises. This information was used in the execution of CP16 to allow the vessel to target the most promising dFADs. Only one anchored TAO buoy was visited with almost all the 11,000+ tuna being tagged on 76 different dFADs. It is also noteworthy that CP16 operated during the three-month period when purse seining on FADs is prohibited in the WCPFC area, allowing time for the tagged tuna to mix and not be subject to capture for a while.

Tag releases were 53% bigeye, 40% yellowfin and 7% skipjack, ranging in size from about 3 to 150 pounds. It was remarkable that close to 50% of all the tagged tuna were hoisted up from the depths by jigging with sport rods and reels. Here is a general description of a typical tagging day.

*Photo: Chris Stoehr.*

*"Typically we would try and be on station at 02:30, with everyone fishing or tagging by 03:00. Jigging usually had 4-5 sport rods and 3-4 handlines all fishing alongside the starboard gunwhale of the boat. We hoped for 45-60 cm bigeye, because they are easy to capture and are in the best shape for tagging, but many times we hooked much larger fish, as large as 160 lbs for bigeye and 150 lbs for yellowfin on standup jigging equipment! We would aim for 150 releases in each early start jigging session. As daylight showed, we would then convert our workstations to be ready for dangling and trolling, and then work the same dFAD with this gear. Usually if this gear worked it would be short-lived for an hour or so, but intense (900+ releases in one session). Sometimes, even after this dangling, the fish would still be there and we would jig again. After all of this, we would steam to the next dFAD, which ranged from 20 min-3 hrs away, and repeat the process. We would utilize the time in between stations to transcribe and enter data, load tags, get something to eat, and re-tie fishing equipment…then back to it! There was not much time to do anything besides fish, eat, sleep, repeat on this trip; ordinarily I finish at least one book per week on these trips, I finished only one on this trip…the fishing was intense!"*

In addition to conventional tagging with plastic dart tags, the tagging team injected 1,656 fish with strontium chloride solution, which marks the otolith of the fish with a visible marker on the day it was tagged (and is a totally benign substance). Upon recapture, the otolith is removed and viewed under a microscope. An exact count of daily growth rings can then be validated against the number of days it was at liberty. This aids in improving known models of the length-at-age relationship that can give scientists an easy metric to know the stock structure of fish captured in fisheries.

The true success of any tagging effort has to do with how many tagged tuna are recaptured and the tag returned to SPC with the all-important tag recovery data (when recaptured, where, fork length, gear type, etc.). The tuna caught by local fishermen have to come from somewhere and tagged tuna can reveal important information on tuna movements, growth and catch by different fishing fleets. There have already been a handful of interesting, longer-term recaptures near Hawai'i from tags deployed during SPC cruises in 2020 and 2021.

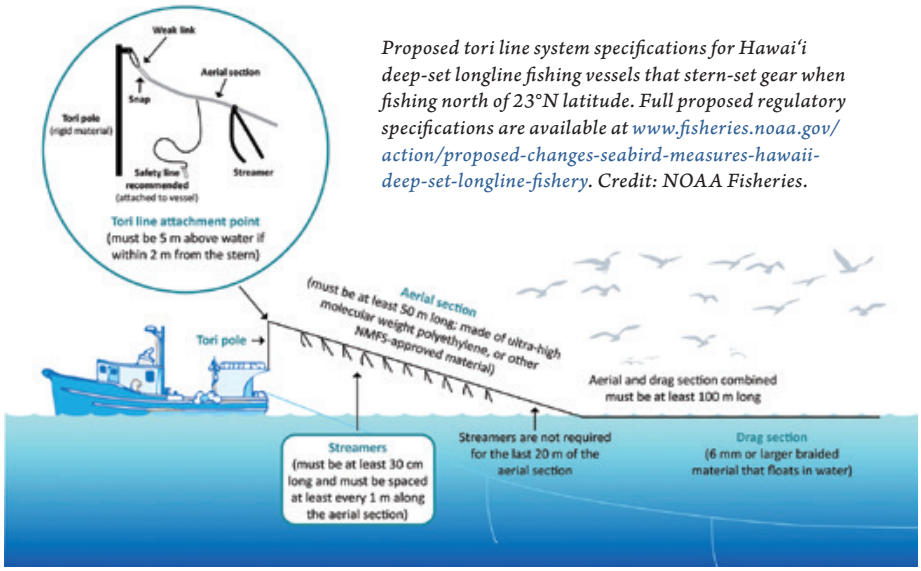

*A bigeye tuna that is a typical size for tagging studies. Photo: Chris Stoehr.*

If you catch a tagged tuna, measure the fork length to the nearest ½" (snout to fork of tail) and record the associated capture data, save the tag and take a picture if possible. Report the recapture to the SPC on the email on the tag. In Hawai'i, you can e-mail David Itano for advice and a tag reward shirt with the program logo at *daveitano@gmail.com*. For more information, visit *https://tagging.spc.int*.

## 2024 NOAA Recreational Fishing Data Collection Program Plan Soon to be Released

Each year, the NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) publishes an implementation plan that outlines the program's annual priorities. These priorities are informed by the program's strategic goals, as well as specific needs identified by its regional and state partners. It also provides a brief recap of the partnership's accomplishments for the prior year. The "FY2024 MRIP Implementation Plan" will soon be finalized and available on the agency's website at *www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/about-marine-recreational-information-program*.

# NMFS Proposes Improved Seabird Conservation Measures Based on Western Pacific Council Recommendation




*Proposed tori line system specifications for Hawai'i deep-set longline fishing vessels that stern-set gear when fishing north of 23°N latitude. Full proposed regulatory specifications are available at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/proposed-changes-seabird-measures-hawaii-deep-set-longline-fishery. Credit: NOAA Fisheries.*

**On Oct. 17, 2023,** the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) published a proposed rule to modify seabird mitigation measures for the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery managed under the Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council. The proposed rule is based on the Council's recommended changes to replace the currently required blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge with a tori line, also known as streamer lines or bird scaring lines. These recommendations followed a multi-year collaborative effort with fishermen, scientists and fishery managers to improve techniques for avoiding seabird interactions in the largest domestic bigeye tuna longline fishery in the United States.

The proposed changes would only apply to Hawai'i deep-set longline vessels that set their gear from the stern, and would not affect vessels that set their gear from the side ("side-setting"). All deep-set longline vessels would also continue to be required to use weights near the hook, so that the hook sinks out of seabirds' diving depth faster. If finalized as proposed, these changes could go into effect as early as mid-January 2024.

The proposed regulatory change reflects findings from a 2019-2021 collaborative project by the Council, Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) and NMFS. Tori lines typically consist of a towed line with streamers suspended above the area where fishing gear is entering the water, which creates a barrier that prevents seabirds from accessing baited hooks while longline gear is deployed. The project aimed to design a tori line that is safe and practical to use in the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery, as previous testing done in the fishery in the late 1990s identified issues with tori line entanglement with longline gear. The project team developed a design that is light-weight and streamlined, and conducted field trials to compare its effectiveness in deterring seabirds like Laysan and black-footed albatross from interacting with longline gear. The study showed that the tori lines are significantly more effective in deterring seabird interactions than the existing blue-dyed bait measure.

Blue-dyed bait and strategic offal discharge were part of a suite of mitigation measures first required in 2001 for tuna-targeting deep-set longline vessels that set gear from the stern of the vessel when fishing north of 23°N latitude, where the risk of seabird interactions are higher. The implementation of these seabird measures reduced interactions by 70-90%. Over time, seabird interaction trends in the fishery showed a gradual increase, and an analysis of federal observer program data for 2004-2014 showed that blue-dyed bait was less effective in deterring seabird interactions than the alternative option of side-setting. Fishermen also found the bait preparation to be messy and cumbersome as it entails extra steps of thawing and dying the bait prior to each setting operation.

A Council workshop convened in 2018 highlighted the need to find alternative mitigation measure to blue-dyed bait to improve the practicality of the requirements for the fishermen, and workshop participants identified tori lines as a candidate alternative for further testing in the Hawai'i fishery. Available evidence on strategic offal discharge, meant to distract seabirds from baited hooks, also suggests that the measure is not likely having an effect on seabird interaction rates, and may potentially increase seabird attraction to fishing vessels over time.

The Council evaluated the results from the tori line project and other best available scientific information, and recommended the regulatory change in December 2021. In lieu of a regulatory requirement for strategic offal discharge, the Council also recommended best practices training on offal management be added to the mandatory annual protected species workshop for Hawai'i commercial fishermen. Since its final recommendation, the Council, in collaboration with HLA and with support from the National Fish and Wildlife Federation and NMFS National Seabird Program, has been preparing Hawai'i deep-set longline vessels for the anticipated regulatory change by building and distributing tori line systems.

For more information, visit *www.wpcouncil.org/dsll-seabird-proposedrule*.

# Keeping Up with the Times Through the Lokahi Fishing App

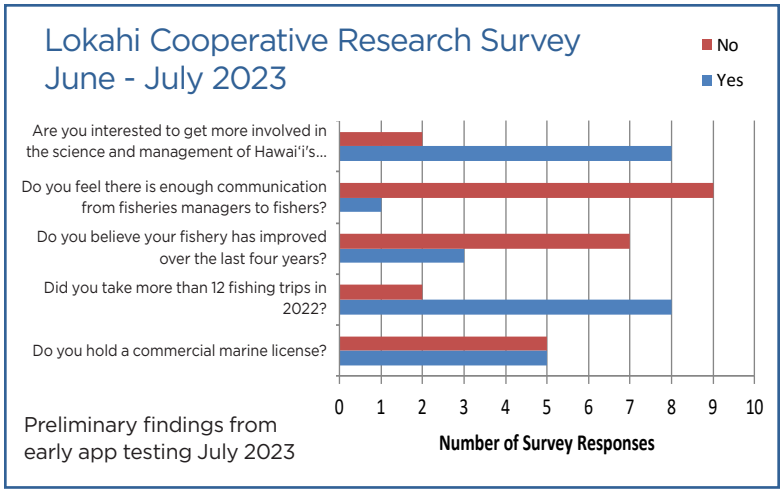
**With the rapid evolution of technology,** even the tight-knit fishing community has had to adapt or leave the younger generation to figure out the latest Apple, Samsung or Google smartphones on their own. Gone are the days of sending letters or walking to a friend's house to share fishing stories. Nowadays, it's as simple as sending a text, making a call or having a virtual fishing adventure via FaceTime. This digital transformation isn't limited to just staying in touch, it has also changed how fishers showcase their catches.

In the past, fishers would head to their local fishing store to pin up photos of their prized catches, engaging in friendly competition for bragging rights. But in today's world, we've witnessed a shift. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have become the new walls for displaying those remarkable catches. Fishers now get to show off their battles with the fish, eliminating the need for tall fishing tales. It's a modern-day fishing showdown, and everyone wants to be crowned the kingpin.

*Lokahi Fishing app home screen on an Apple phone.*

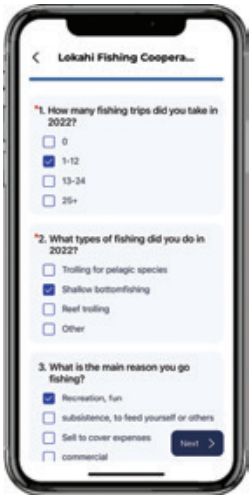
Amid this evolution of social media, Jim Hori, a passionate fisherman from Hawai‘i, embarked on a mission to create a dedicated space for the local fishing community. He introduced the Lokahi Fishing app, a platform that provides local residents with a safe space to boast about their catches. As technology continued to advance and the pandemic pushed us toward social distancing, the Lokahi Fishing app evolved to meet the changing times. While in-person fishing tournaments stopped, Hori joined fellow fishers to host virtual competitions, allowing participants to stay engaged and even win rewards for their reported catches.

Similarly, the NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) faced a similar challenge. In-person surveys became impossible and the agency relied on mail-in surveys to gather fishery-dependent data. During this time, the brilliant minds of fishermen and scientists from the Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG), PIFSC and the Council joined forces with the Lokahi Fishing app developers. Through a cooperative research grant, they created a ‘one-stop shop’ within the app, where fishers could express their interests in fisheries management and scientific research. Their goal was clear—get more Hawai‘i noncommercial fishers actively involved in the research and management of their beloved fisheries.




This collaboration resulted in the birth of a survey feature within the Lokahi Fishing app, launched in summer 2023. The survey asked the fishing community several questions, focusing on their participation in the Hawai‘i Marine Recreational Fishing Survey, fishing habits, and determining what would make it easier for them to contribute to the science and management of Hawai‘i's fisheries.

From June to October 2023, approximately 35 enthusiastic fishers completed the surveys. While the group might have yet to receive the exact results they were hoping for, they understand that the app's users are still learning about the importance of these surveys. Preliminary survey results say that the best way for managers and scientists to engage with noncommercial fishers is either through social media, text, the app and/or webinars/podcasts. As time marches on, new opportunities will undoubtedly arise and the Lokahi Fishing App may very well become fishermen's go-to social media platform. It will be a place to showcase their prized catches and a platform to provide feedback on the hottest topics and issues in their local fisheries.

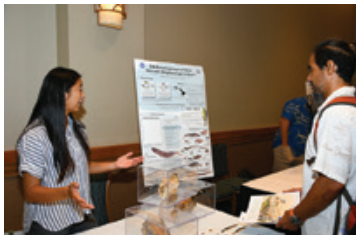


*Example of survey questions on the Lokahi fishing app.*

The future of fishing and fisheries management in Hawai‘i is evolving, and thanks to the Lokahi Fishing app, it's a future where every fisher has a voice and a platform to share their experiences, knowledge and passion for the sea. If you would like to participate in this survey, the app is available for iOS and Android (with limitations) users to provide their feedback from the fleet.

For more information, visit *www.fishtoday.org/new-page-2-2* or *https://rvtechnologies.com/lokahi-fishing*.

# Hawai‘i Fishers Forum: What’s in the Gut?

**As part of its 196th meeting** held in Honolulu, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council hosted a public Fishers Forum Sept. 18, 2023. The Forum’s theme – “What’s in the Gut?” – was built on ecosystem relationships and the interconnectivity between the offshore, coastal and upland environments. Understanding these relationships are important to research, monitoring and management of fishery resources. Traditional lawai‘a (fishermen) knew and understood the connectivity between the species and environment and were able to use this information to predict the seasonality of important food fishes.

About 75 attendees gathered at the Ala Moana Hotel to learn from 12 exhibitors from various government agencies and organizations about fisheries, fishery science, seafood, and safety at sea. Council Member from Hawai‘i Matt Ramsey provided a welcome and introductions, and Hawai‘i Advisory Panel Vice Chair Gil Kuali‘i facilitated the presentations. NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center oceanographer Phoebe Woodworth-Jefcoats described ongoing mahimahi, bigeye tuna and lancetfish diet studies, noting that lancetfish are ideal “samplers” because their gut contents appear largely undigested and are easily identifiable. Butch Farm, the fishing guru from Hobbietat, shared how to match fishing lures to the type of bait the fish are eating to increase fishermen’s chances of hooking the big one. Alex Min provided information on the Lokahi Fishing app that helps fishermen record their catch data and network with others about daily conditions on the water, and the seasonality of fish and their prey.

FISHERS FORUM Hawaii

At the Forum, the Council conducted an informal survey with a few questions on fishery data collection. Of the 24 respondents, 22 were active fishermen and 92% agreed that the government should require the collection of basic catch and effort data to manage fisheries. Their answers varied as to which method was preferred to gather the data, with nine people choosing an electronic format, four a verbal format, three a paper mail in survey, and one a combination to give fishers flexibility. One person not in favor of required fishery data collection said they believed fishing should be free and that NOAA has funding for research. A few people emphasized the need to better collect recreational data to effectively manage fisheries, and that all data should be shared with the public on a regular basis.

# 2023 Richard Shiroma Award

*Roy Morioka (middle) is all smiles with Dean Sensui (left) and Mark Mitsuyasu.*

**The Council also announced** the winner of the Richard Shiroma award, which is in recognition of the service the late Richard Shiroma dedicated to the Council as the chair of its Recreational Data Task Force and vice chair of its Advisory Panel. Roy Morioka, avid spearfisherman, recreational and commercial angler, and life-long steward of the sea, was chosen as the 2023 recipient.

The award is given to a Council member or one of its advisory group members that has demonstrated exemplary dedication and performance. It was first presented in 2006 to James Borja from Guam, followed by William Mossman from Hawai‘i in 2008, and Stephen Haleck from American Samoa in 2015.

Roy has played a key role in the management of the federally managed fisheries in Hawai‘i and the Western Pacific beginning with his membership to the Council 1996 and eventually becoming Council chairman. He has long-been involved with fisheries of Hawai‘i and the Pacific, participating with the Pacific Ocean Research Foundation (PORF), the Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG), and the Hawai‘i Fishermen’s Association for Conservation and Tradition (HFACT), providing valuable insight on the fishermen’s perspective to science and management at the state and national levels. Roy is THE contact for the Hawai‘i fishing community, involved in numerous working and advisory groups, providing comments on bills to the legislature, and keeping the fishing community up-to-date through his extensive e-mail listserv.


# Get to Know Your Council Members:

## Roger Q. Dang

*Learn about the people who balance competing interests, while trying to make fishery management decisions for the overall benefit of the nation.*

**Roger Dang** was initially appointed to the Council in 2020 and recently reappointed for a second term in August 2023. Roger has been involved in the family fishing business, Pacific Fishing & Supply Inc., from a young age. Roger is also a member of the Hawaii Longline Association Board of Directors. The Council recommended him to represent the Council as a U.S. commissioner to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission in 2021, and his appointment from the White House is pending.

**How did your family get into the fishing business?**

My family's journey into the Hawai'i longline industry began in the late 1980s with a phone call from my grandfather to my father. At that time, my father, then a floor plant supervisor for an aircraft manufacturer in Wichita, Kansas, received the call saying, "Hey. There's fish out in Hawai'i. We have a shrimp boat in Louisiana. We could potentially re-gear it, refit, and fish in Hawai'i." My father, along with my mother and three very young children, made the bold decision to relocate to Hawai'i with that one fishing vessel.

While my father was out at sea, my mother managed the household. What initially started as a small effort to save money on fishing supplies, bait and gear grew steadily over the years into a business that supplied our vessels and friends and family's vessels who joined the fishing community in the late 1980s.

**When did you get involved in the family business?**

As the oldest of six kids in my family, whenever we were all able, we helped organize supplies at home, loading and unloading them after school, on weekends and on holidays. It became a family effort, fostering an environment where we shared stories about my father's catches and experiences. Even after all these years and despite our growth, the essence of our operation remains familial. Our team's spirit reflects this, with my parents, siblings and our team of extended family members all contributing to support our local fleet.

**How has your family business grown in recent years?**

In 2018, we acquired Fresh Island Fish with the mission to spotlight Hawai'i fishing and offer access to fish caught by our vessels. This endeavor allowed us to market our catch to new markets, increasing the value of Hawai'i's seafood. It's recognized as a high-quality product, especially locally in restaurants and hotels promoting local fish on menus. This recognition by both visitors and locals alike is a source of pride. The increased demand benefits our business and supports local fishermen, allowing them to continue pursuing their passion.

**What motivated you to serve on the Council?**

I wanted to be a member of the Council to share the perspectives and experiences I have as a lifelong member of the Hawai'i commercial fishing community. Living marine resources are critical to the food security of our islands and need the involvement of all interested parties. Together, we can work with the best available science and data to improve management policies that can help ensure the continuity of sustainable resources for this and the next generation of fishing families.

**What are some challenges/opportunities you see ahead for Hawai'i fisheries?**

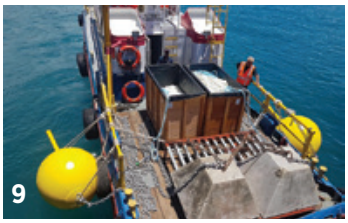
Hawai'i's commercial fisheries need the support of our neighbors and the Hawai'i community to support our highly sustainable, effective and responsible resource management. We have taken opportunities to embrace sustainable fishing practices and continue to drive technological innovation to aid in protected species management.

**Lastly, what is your favorite fish and preparation?**

One of my favorite fish preparations is Hawaiian Swordfish Vietnamese Summer Rolls with fresh pineapple and anchovy dipping sauce. The swordfish is butter-poached, roasted and rolled into fresh spring mix greens and rice paper. The roll is dipped into the amazing sweet and sour and spicy sauce. I look forward to it every single season.

# Guam's 2023-2026 Marine Conservation Plan Nears the Finish Line

*Guam MCP projects 7, 9, 10 and 12. All photos: Felix Reyes.*




**At its 196th meeting in Honolulu,** Sept. 18-20, 2023, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council reviewed and approved Guam's 2023-2026 Marine Conservation Plan (MCP). The next step is for the Governor of Guam to send the MCP to the National Marine Fisheries Service for final review and approval.

The comprehensive plan was the culmination of collaborative work involving the Council, Guam's Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources (DAWR), Bureau of Statistics and Plans, Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association, Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero's administration, Port Authority of Guam, Mayor's Council of Guam and Guam's fishing community.

DAWR presented the initial plan to the public in December 2022. Community members provided feedback on their priorities regarding Guam's marine environment and resources. After all input was collected, DAWR staff, together with Council staff, developed a draft MCP that was circulated amongst stakeholders for review before going to the Council.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) governs marine fisheries management in U.S. federal waters. It allows for agreements like the Pacific Insular Area Fishery Agreement that lets foreign boats fish near Guam, with the Governor's approval. The money from these agreements and fines for violations goes to Guam's treasury, which funds the plan. The MSA also authorizes the Council to use funds from the Western Pacific Sustainable Fisheries Fund to implement MCP projects.

The Guam MCP contains six conservation and management objectives, followed by projects and activities designed to meet those objectives.

***Objective 1.*** Fisheries Resource Assessment, Research and Monitoring

***Objective 2.*** Effective Surveillance and Enforcement Mechanisms

***Objective 3.*** Promote Ecosystems Approach to Fisheries Management, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation, and Regional Cooperation

***Objective 4.*** Public Participation, Research, Education and Outreach, and Local Capacity Building

***Objective 5.*** Domestic Fisheries Development

***Objective 6.*** Recognizing the Importance of Island Cultures and Traditional Fishing Practices and Community-Based Management

For example, Project 12 (see Table 1) under Objective 4 was suggested by the Guam Co-op, and seeks to build local capacity in the marine technical industry sector. It supports training and certification for local young individuals at a nationally or internationally recognized training institution on marine vessel and equipment repair and maintenance. Selected participants would complete immersive and comprehensive training off-island so that they can be gainfully employed in the local fishing industry, and train others to expand the local knowledge base. No local training is currently available and may be part of the reason for the high cost of boat repair and maintenance.

Once the MCP is finalized, it will be available from the Council's website: *www.wpcouncil.org.*

**Table 1: 2023 MARINE CONSERVATION PLAN PROJECT LISTING**

| No. | Project Description | Objective/Project Strategy No. | Amount | Priority |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Herbivore Reef Fish Hatchery | 3.2 | $80,000 | High |
| 2 | Teaching Traditional Fishing in the Villages | 6.1 | $70,000 | High |
| 3 | Plankton-Seq: Deep Sequencing in Search of Mañahak Candy | 1.2 | $143,835 | High |
| 4 | Improving Relationships between Resource Members, Local, and Migrant Fishermen | 6.2 | $24,000 | High |
| 5 | Exclusive Economic Zone Enforcement | 2.1 | $100,000 | High |
| 6 | Law Enforcement Drone Surveillance of Marine Preserves | 2.2 | $34,761 | High |
| 7 | Developing a Mañahak Hatchery for Restocking Purposes | 5.4 | $148,000 | High |
| 8 | The Americans with Disabilities Act Accessible Fishing Platform Phase IV: Expansion of Fishing Platform by 45 ft. | 5.3 | $320,000 | High |
| 9 | Fish Aggregating Device Deployment Vessel | 5.2 | $250,000 | High |
| 10 | Rehabilitations and Improvements to Agat Small Boat Marina Dock B | 5.1 | $41,914,177 | High |
| 11 | Shallow Bottom Fishing along the Outer Reef Flat: The Effects of Long-Term Unsustainable Fishing Effort, Marine Preserve Designation, and Effort Limited by Rout Sea Conditions | 1.4 | $29,255 | High |
| 12 | Marine Industry Capacity Building | 4.1 | $309,472 | High |
| 13 | Abandoned Gill Net Removal from Reefs | 1.1 | $19,000 | Medium |
| 14 | Guam Volunteer Fishery Data Collection Project | 1.3 | $50,000 | Medium |
| 15 | Longline Permit, Reporting, and Quota Utilization Program to Facilitate Responsible Fisheries Development | 3.1 | $100,000 | Medium |
| 16 | Preservation of Traditional In-shore Fishing Practices | 6.3 | $60,000 | Low |
| **TOTAL PROJECT COSTS:** | | | **$43,652,500** | |

# Heaviest Recorded Marlin Caught in Guam since 1969

*Captain Rob Vasquez (center) and crew of* The Chief *with their catch.*

**The Greg D. Perez International Sportfishing Derby,** held Sept.16, 2023, offered a $50,000 reward for the first billfish caught during the tournament that is officially heavier than the 1,153-pound world record marlin caught by the event's namesake Aug. 21, 1969—a record that held for 13 years.

What follows is a tale of patience, determination and the unbreakable spirit of the sea. A tiny 22-foot fishing vessel, *The Chief*, embarked on a fishing adventure well aware of the challenges that awaited them. Below is a narration of the once-in-a-lifetime experience by Captain Rob Vasquez:

*"Marlin, known for their majestic size and strength, are the stuff of legends in the world of sportfishing. We knew that capturing one would require not just skill, but also a deep understanding of the ocean and its inhabitants. The derby was a test of not only our fishing prowess but also our camaraderie as a team. We spent hours under the blazing sun, scanning the vast expanse of water, waiting for that telltale sign of a marlin's presence. The suspense was palpable, and the anticipation, electric. And then, it happened. The moment we had all been waiting for. The line tugged violently, and the reel screamed as it gave way to the raw power beneath the waves. Our hearts raced as the battle of wills commenced between Man and Marlin. In those intense moments, our teamwork shone. The crew aboard our vessel worked in perfect harmony, seamlessly coordinating every move. The struggle to reel in the beast was grueling, a true test of strength and endurance. But it was more than just a physical battle; it was a connection with nature at its most primal. As we brought the marlin closer to the boat, I couldn't help but marvel at its beauty and strength, a testament to the wonders of the ocean. It was a humbling experience, a reminder of our responsibility to protect these magnificent creatures and their habitat. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, we had it on deck—the biggest marlin any of us had ever seen. It was a breathtaking sight, a creature of immense grace and power. We measured it, documented it, and, after a few cherished moments, we as a team decided to share the catch with family and friends. Our victory in capturing the biggest marlin during this derby is a testament to the spirit of sportsmanship and conservation that defines the world of sportfishing. It's a reminder that our passion for this pursuit must always be tempered by our responsibility to protect and preserve the oceans and the creatures that call them home. In closing, I want to thank my fellow anglers, our incredible crew, and all those who organized this derby. It's not just about the catch; it's about the journey, the camaraderie, and the deep appreciation we have for the wonders of the sea. May we continue to cherish these moments and work together to ensure that future generations can experience the thrill of the chase and the beauty of the ocean. Thank you, and may the sea always be generous with its treasures."*

The beast of a marlin Vasquez was referring to was an 852.5-pound giant. And although shy of the world record, Vasquez's marlin was the heaviest recorded in Guam since 1969. The story does not end there however… Vasquez, 1st mate Peter Diaz and 2nd mate Matthew Muña, faced even more challenges. When they loaded fish onto their small boat, the fish was so heavy they started taking on water over the transom. Nearby boats came to their rescue and with their help, they managed to bring the fish into the Greg D. Perez Marina. They earned the Crying Towel Award because they missed the 6:00 p.m. derby cutoff time by just 30 minutes that would have earned them a $4,000 grand prize cash award. Great job either way Captain Rob and crew!

Biba Peskadot!

# Get to Know Your Council Members:
# Pedro Itibus and Gene Weaver

*Pete Itibus (left) bottomfishing with his brother Frank.*

**Pedro "Pete" Itibus** was appointed to the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council as an at-large voting member from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) for a 3-year term starting in August 2023. He is one of the longest recreational and subsistence fishers on Saipan, and one of the first members of the Saipan Fishermen's Association founded in 1985. He was also a Council CNMI Advisory Panel member for 15 years. Pete, who is now retired from the CNMI Government, started his years in public service in 1971 as a police officer, later working as an assistant clerk of the Commonwealth Clerk of Court, and as the Deputy Secretary for the Department of Public Lands.

**Why did you want to be part of the Council?**

I wanted to be a voice for the CNMI, to continue to practice traditional fishing methods, sustain and protect our marine resources, and to teach our youth about tradition and culture.

I follow traditional fishing beliefs of taking only what is needed, and sharing my catch with family and friends.

**How do you think your background and experiences will contribute to fishery management efforts in the Western Pacific?**

Our ocean resources bring tremendous competing interests, and I strongly believe that with my broad experience as a commercial and recreational fisherman I will be able to contribute and be able to make a balanced and fair decision to protect our resources.

**What do you see as the most pressing issues or threats to CNMI fisheries, and how do you propose addressing them?**

First, it was the Marianas Trench Monument, and second, the green sea turtle critical habitat. The CNMI Governor has requested that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) extend the comment process and also requested the agency update the green sea turtle status review report. I would propose that NMFS be more proactive and engage with our local government, traditional leaders and the communities to address these concerns. I also propose that the local government under the guidance of the Department of Lands and Natural Resource / Division of Fish and Wildlife be the lead agency in designating areas like marine protected areas.

**What is your favorite fish to eat?**

Octopus! Mixed with fresh coconut juice, white onions and green onions.

*Gene Weaver with granddaughter Sophie.*

**Gerald "Gene" Weaver** was also appointed to the Council in August 2023 as an obligatory voting member from the CNMI. He is a long-time community volunteer and fishing tournament organizer for the Territory, and the longest living President for the Saipan Fishermen's Association, with more than 13 years of service. Gene is one of the founding members for Tasi to Table, a 501c3 non-profit corporation established in July 2020. The program engages youth through teaching fishing methodologies, boating safety, to protect and safeguard the environment, and about mental health. Outside of his service to the community, since 2008 Weaver has been a full-time Building Superintendent for the CNMI Judiciary. Prior to the courts, he served as the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Project Officer for the Office of the Lt. Governor, a safety officer for Seafix Inc., and General Manager for Mid-Pac Micronesia.

**Why did you want to be part of the Council?**

As a CNMI resident and active advocate in elevating the capacity of our residents, my desire is to work with community members in voicing their concerns and sharing updates about the islands and the region. Residents of the CNMI need to be heard, not just represented.

**How do you think your background and experiences will contribute to fishery management efforts in the Western Pacific?**

With my experience as a fisher, as well as a community organizer, I will be able to provide direct and on the ground insight of what is really occurring in the CNMI with regard to commercial and recreational fishing and markets.

**What does effective fishery management look like to you?**

Being able to work collaboratively with state and federal agencies in meeting sustainable fisheries goals, while at the same time taking into consideration traditional and cultural practices.

**What is your favorite fish to catch?**

Wahoo and yellowfin tuna.

# Congressional Corner

***To keep up to date on congressional activities, visit www.congress.gov.***

As the 118th Congress continues, the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing Sept. 19, 2023, to "Examine Barriers to Access in Federal Waters: A closer Look at the Marine Sanctuary and Monument System." Subcommittee Chair Paul Gosar (R-AZ) oversaw the hearing that was conducted to review authorities such as the National Marine Sanctuaries Act and Antiquities Act and the negative consequences of a sanctuary or monument designation for the economy.

Witnesses at the subcommittee hearing included Jainey Bavishi, assistant secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere; Florence Kargi, regional affairs manager for the Coastal Village Region Fund in Anchorage, AK; Bill Gibbons-Fly, executive director of the American Tunaboat Association; Eric Reid, chair of the New England Fishery Management Council; and William Aila, Native Hawaiian fisherman. As with all hearings, the subcommittee invited each of the witnesses to provide testimony and then members of the subcommittee were provided time to question the witnesses.

Bavishi testified on NOAA's role in sanctuaries and monuments and regarding the Pacific Remote Islands sanctuary said that NOAA "has not made any decisions regarding fishing regulations in the proposed sanctuary, but they are in the process of developing alternatives that consider regulatory actions and options for boundaries." She added that no decision has been made on the prohibition of commercial fishing.

Aila expressed his support for marine protected areas and said "when one tool doesn't work, you use another tool." Ranking Member Melanie Stansbury (D-NM) asked about how marine protected areas (MPAs) protect fisheries. Aila responded MPAs provide more fish that can be caught around the boundaries, provide additional benefits and protection, and that they perpetuate culture.

Gibbons-Fly testified that the U.S. purse seine tuna fleet is struggling to survive, and with it, the American Samoa tuna cannery and economy. He noted the dependence of American Samoa on the U.S. tuna fishery and the impacts of closing the Pacific Remote Islands to commercial fishing. He said that "any assertion that the economic impact of the proposed sanctuary will be negligible or minimal is patently and demonstrably false." Congresswoman Uifa'atali Amata Radewagen (R-AS) noted the United States is going to be a passive bystander in the world's largest fishery and asked Gibbons-Fly for examples of cumulative impacts of the proposed sanctuary. Gibbons Fly said that even if there are any benefits like 'spillover,' those fish are taken by, and benefit, foreign countries like China and not the U.S. fleet. He added that "it's as if there's a ratchet that's being cranked and it only goes one way, it gets tighter and tighter. It never goes back the other way," as he described how the government has said each time that the impacts would be minimal, but the cumulative effect "is killing us."

*At the hearing, Congresswoman Amata said the proposed mid-Pacific marine sanctuary could potentially "take all of our EEZ away from us." House Natural Resources Committee video image.*

A key takeaway from the hearing was the impact that sanctuaries have on not only fisheries, but the secondary and tertiary impacts to those communities dependent on the fisheries, as well as the role fisheries may play in geo-political issues facing the United States.

Congress also continues to struggle with passing an appropriation bill and the change in House Speaker, so recent attention to fisheries bills has been minimal. Bills on shark conservation, aquaculture and coastal habitats continue to be debated, as well as bills to make NOAA a stand-alone agency. None of the bills have been scheduled for markup and are likely to continue to be debated and discussed into the new year as Congress' attention turns to larger issues.

To view the subcommittee meeting and read the witness testimony, visit *https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=414811*.

# New Outreach Materials



**The 2024 traditional lunar calendars** will soon be available for Hawai'i, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Guam. The calendars aim to promote ecosystem-based fisheries management, support indigenous fishing and management practices, and involvement in the fisheries management decision-making process. The 13-month calendars are from mid-January 2024 through the end of January 2025 and provide tide charts, lunar rise and set times, and phases of the moon (29-30 days/month). The lunar months, moon phases and traditional calendar months are also given in the regional languages.

The theme for the *Kaulana Mahina* (Hawaiian Lunar Calendar) is ecosystem indicators, embracing the Hawaiian practice of kilo (observation) of the environment from mauka (upland) to makai (seaward). The American Samoa calendar (*Tau Masina o Amerika Samoa*) provides information about fisheries in the territory, and describes the importance of the cannery and seafood harvest for the Samoan culture. The CNMI calendar (*Eskaleran Pulan Chamorro/Refaluwasch Pápáál Maram*) shares various aspects of sustainable fishing, from fishing gear, to local management initiatives and restoration projects, to educating the youth to be the stewards of tomorrow. The Guam calendar (*Fanha'aniyan Pulan CHamoru*) highlights 12 fishing families that span generations, sharing their knowledge, experience, and commitment to sustainability and cultural perpetuation.




For Hawai'i, in addition to the larger classroom-style *Kaulana Mahina*, the Council created a pocket-sized water-resistant version especially for fishermen.

To receive a FREE 2024 printed calendar (limited quantities available), send an email request including your full name and mailing address to *info@wpcouncil.org*. All calendars will also be available to download and print at *www.wpcouncil.org/educational-resources/lunar-calendars*.

# Council Family Updates

At the 196th Council meeting, the Council supported the following advisory body changes:

- Appointed **Jason Helyer** to the Archipelagic Plan Team.
- Appointed **Jason Miller** to the Guam Advisory Panel.

The Council chair appointed **Dominick San Gil** as vice chair of the Guam Advisory Panel.


*Manny Dueñas, president of the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association and Council vice chair for Guam, gave a brief history of bottomfish biosampling and life history done at the Coop to attendees of the Marianas Biosampling Summit organized by NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center Nov. 8-9, 2023. Other meeting participants included representatives from the Guam Division of Aquatic & Wildlife Resources, University of Guam, Micronesian Environmental Services, CNMI Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, ARC Environmental Services and fishing community members. Photo: Floyd Masga.*

# 2023-24 Council Calendar

***Check the Council website for in-person and remote public participation options for meetings hosted by the Council.***

## NOVEMBER

**27**
Fishing Industry Advisory Committee meeting

**28-29**
150th Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) meeting (virtual)

**30-Dec 12**
2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, Dubai, United Arab Emirates*

## DECEMBER

**4**
Hawai'i AP meeting

**4-8**
20th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, Rarotonga, Cook Islands*

**5**
American Samoa AP meeting

**7**
Joint Marianas AP meeting (ChST)

**11**
Executive & Budget Standing Committee meeting (virtual with host site)

**11-15**
Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review for the Main Hawaiian Islands Deep 7 Bottomfish Complex

**12-13**
197th Council meeting (virtual with host sites)

## JANUARY

**23-26**
11th Compliance and Technical Committee Meetings (South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation, SPRFMO), Manta Ecuador*

**29-Feb 2**
12th SPRFMO Annual Meeting, Manta, Ecuador*

## MARCH

**12-14**
151st SSC meeting (tent)

**18-22**
198th Council meeting (tent)

** Meetings not hosted by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.*

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# Recipe: PALANI CHOWDER

*Recipe provided by Xavier Solmirin*

**Poseidon Fisheries Research (PFR)** teamed up with Hawai'i fishers and chefs to create a cookbook full of yummy recipes and practical knowledge to sustainably harvest reef fish. "Hawai'i's Reef Fish: Food, Science and Tradition" combines more than 50 recipes from local lawai'a across the Hawaiian Islands. It also includes information on more than 30 coral reef species such as biology, ecology, fishing regulations, state catch records and descriptions of traditional Hawaiian uses. All this information is paired with beautiful underwater fish photos from local photographers to help with fish identification. Check it out at *http://poseidonfisheriesresearch.org/research*. PFR will also be selling the cookbooks on their website starting in November 2023 and they will also be available at various fishing stores and bookstores around the state.

Just in time for cooler temperatures, try the Palani (Eyestripe Surgeonfish) Chowder recipe!

### Ingredients

1 pound Palani or Pualu filet, skinless, cut in to ½-inch cubes
¼ cup butter
4 strips of bacon (raw), chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 cup onion, diced
½ cup celery, diced
6 tablespoons flour
1 bay leaf
2 large Yukon gold potatoes, diced
1 quart chicken broth or stock
12 ounces half-and-half
Salt, to taste
Toppings, optional: chives and bacon bits

### Preparation

1. Over medium heat, melt butter in a large sauce pot and add bacon. Cook until bacon fat is rendered, about 5 minutes.
2. Add onions and garlic and cook until translucent.
3. Add flour to the pot and evenly mix it into the vegetables.
4. Add potatoes, bay leaf, and chicken broth and simmer until potatoes are fork tender.
5. Add half-and-half and cook on low, stirring to prevent burning, for about 15 minutes.
6. Add Palani cubes into the soup and let simmer for 15–20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
7. Once fish is cooked, adjust seasoning as needed and serve with optional toppings if desired.

*Photo: Craig Omori*

**The 150th Scientific & Statistical Committee (SSC) meeting** will be held Nov. 28 to 29, 2023, virtually via Webex: *https://tinyurl.com/150SSCMtg*.

**Major agenda items include:** Multi-year U.S. Territorial bigeye tuna catch limit and allocation specifications (action item); Fishing regulations in the proposed Pacific Remote Islands National Marine Sanctuary (PRINMS) (action item); Hawai'i Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) uku essential fish habitat (EFH) revision amendment (action item); Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) proposal discussion; and Council research priorities review and 2024-2026 SSC plan development.

**The 197th meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council** will be held Dec. 12 to 13, 2023, virtually with host sites at: 1164 Bishop St., Ste. 1400, Honolulu, HI; Cliff Pointe, Tedi of Samoa Bldg. Ste. 208B, Fagatogo Village, AS; 304 W. O'Brien Dr., Hagatna, Guam; BRI Bldg. Ste. 205, Kopa Di Oru St., Garapan, Saipan, CNMI. Webex link: *https://tinyurl.com/196WPCouncilMtg*.

For more information on the Webex connections, and complete agendas and meeting documents, go to *www.wpcouncil.org/meetings-calendars*.

**Summary of Action Items at the December 2023 Council Meeting**

The Council will consider and may take action on the issues summarized below.

**1. Fishing Regulations for the Proposed PRINMS (Final Action)**

In 2009, President Bush used the Antiquities Act to designate the Pacific Remote Islands (PRI) (Baker, Howland, Jarvis and Wake Islands, Johnston and Palmyra Atolls, and Kingman Reef) as the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, covering 490,343 square miles with prohibitions on commercial fishing but allowances for noncommercial and charter fishing. In 2014, President Obama expanded the Monument using the same authority to include Wake, Johnston and Jarvis Islands out to the 200-nautical-mile U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) limit while keeping the 50-nm limit for other islands. In March 2023, President Biden instructed the Secretary of Commerce to consider making the monument and additional U.S. EEZ areas a national marine sanctuary.

The National Marine Sanctuaries Act requires involving the appropriate fishery management council for fishing regulations within the EEZ. NOAA has identified that proposed fishing management actions are necessary, and provided the Council a package of materials intended to help it determine what would best fulfill the sanctuary goals and objectives. The Council can decide to prepare draft fishing regulations and recommendations, determine there is no need for regulations, or defer a decision.

At its 196th meeting in September, the Council reviewed data from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), indicating that current fisheries regulations align with NOAA thresholds under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and other laws. The data emphasized fishing's cultural significance in American Samoa, with a reduction posing a disproportional burden to the territory and the U.S. longline and purse seine fleets. Recognizing that a goal of the proposed sanctuary is to support cultural heritage, and that fishing is central to the culture of Pacific Island communities, the Council took initial action on draft fishing regulations for the proposed sanctuary in the PRI. The Council preliminarily found that the existing fishing regulations under the current structure may already meet the goals and objectives of the proposed sanctuary (as written).

***At its 197th meeting, the Council will be provided with additional information for final consideration of fishing regulations for the proposed PRINMS.*** The final decision from the Council is due to NOAA by Dec. 20, 2023. The Council may choose to:

1. Determine that fishing regulations are sufficient to meet the goals and objectives of the proposed sanctuary; or
2. Revise/add fishing regulations that may be needed to meet the goals and objectives of the proposed sanctuary.

**2. American Samoa Bottomfish: Discontinuing the Rebuilding Plan and ACL Specifications for 2024-2026 (Final Action)**

At its June 2023 meeting, the Council reviewed the 2023 American Samoa bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) stock assessment and confirmed the fishery was not overfished or experiencing overfishing. The new assessment was reviewed by the Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review panel and the Council's SSC and deemed the best scientific information available (BSIA). The Council directed staff to draft a FEP amendment to end the current rebuilding plan and assemble P* (risk of overfishing) and SEEM (Social, Economic, Ecological and Management Uncertainty) working groups. In August 2023, these groups along with the SSC evaluated multiple factors and recommended a risk level to the Council.

In September 2023, the SSC provided the Council with a level of acceptable biological catch for American Samoa BMUS based on the stock assessment. The Council utilized the various analyses to propose aggregated annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) for the American Samoa bottomfish fishery (2024-2026). Given the findings of no overfishing and the stock not being overfished, the Council recommended discontinuing the current rebuilding plan. ***At its 197th meeting, the Council will consider taking final action on an alternative for discontinuing the rebuilding plan and specifying the ACL and AMs for the American Samoa bottomfish fishery for fishing years 2024-2026.***

**3. Hawai'i FEP Uku EFH Revision Amendment**

In 1999, the Council established EFH definitions for Hawai'i bottomfish, including uku (grey snapper), through Amendment 6 to the Bottomfish and Seamount Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. This framework carried forward into the spatially oriented FEPs during the 2009 reorganization. In 2016, Amendment 4 to the Hawai'i FEP refined EFH and Habitat Areas of Particular Concern for bottomfish, categorizing them into three assemblages based on depth. However, recent studies have enhanced knowledge about uku habitat in the Hawai'i Archipelago.

In 2022, two new models for uku EFH in Hawai'i were developed and deemed BSIA by the Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review (WPSAR) and the SSC. Recognizing these as improvements over the status quo, the Council recommended that staff develop options for revising the current uku EFH. The purpose is to align the Hawai'i FEP with NMFS guidelines and MSA National Standard 2, ensuring periodic review and revision of EFH provisions based on BSIA. This action aims to support economic and social benefits of the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) uku fisheries while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the stock and habitat.

At its 195th meeting in June 2023, the Council took initial action, recommending a revision of MHI uku EFH for sub-adults and adults based on the new WPSAR-reviewed EFH models. ***At its 197th meeting, the Council may take final action, choosing between retaining the current EFH description (alternative 1) or updating EFH descriptions and maps for subadult and adult uku in the MHI using the BSIA (alternative 2), with two sub-alternatives based on data levels.***

**4. Multi-Year US Territorial Bigeye Tuna Catch Limit and Allocation Specification (Final Action)**

In December 2021, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) adopted conservation and management measure (CMM) 2021-01, maintaining the 2016 longline bigeye limits for six countries, including the United States. However, this measure doesn't set individual limits for bigeye tuna catch in the Convention Area by Small Island Developing States and U.S. Participating Territories, including American Samoa, Guam and the CNMI. With a potential expiration at the end of 2023, new catch limits for fishery sectors and flag states under the WCPFC might be established.

August 2023 stock assessments in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean indicated that the bigeye tuna stock is not subject to overfishing and is approximately 35% of unfished biomass. The Pacific Community (SPC) projected future stock analyses, suggesting significant increases in bigeye catch over the next 30 years without posing a risk of overfishing. Amendment 7 of the Council's Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan's established a management framework that puts limits on the catch and effort in the U.S. Participating Territories for pelagic management unit species, including bigeye tuna. The framework has provided the territories the ability to make an agreement with the Hawai'i longline fleet to allocate a portion of its bigeye tuna catch in exchange for funding fishery development projects.

The Council, having taken initial action at its 194th Meeting in March 2023, recommended a preliminary preferred alternative of no catch limits and 1,500-metric-ton allocation limits for each U.S. Participating Territory for fishing years 2024 through 2026. The proposal aims to continue the Council's modification of the management framework, initially proposed in 2019 but delayed due to a new stock assessment for bigeye tuna and updated biological opinions on the Hawai'i longline fishery. ***At its 197th meeting, the Council may take final action for specifying the multi-year territorial bigeye tuna catch and allocation limits through the Council's previously recommended modification of the management framework.***