



**Western
Pacific
Regional
Fishery
Management
Council**

Meeting of the CNMI Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee

February 27, 2025
8:30 a.m. to 12:11 p.m. ChST
Crowne Plaza, Hibiscus Hall
Garapan, Saipan

DRAFT 2025 REAC Report

1. Welcome and Introductions

Sylvan Igisomar, CNMI Vice-Chair

Sylvan Igisomar, CNMI Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC) Chair, Council Chairman and Secretary of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources opened the meeting at 8:30 a.m. and welcomed the members and the Honorable Lieutenant Governor, David M. Apatang, to the REAC meeting. Members in attendance included:

- Floyd Masga - Bureau of Environmental and Coastal Quality
- Jera Cing - Commonwealth Ports Authority
- Rosemary Camacho - Division of Fish and Wildlife
- Zabrina Cruz - Division of Environmental Quality
- Gene Weaver - Tasi to Table; Council Member
- Jesse Stole - Department of Public Safety
- Friends of the Marianas Trench - Laurie Peterka
- David Benavente - Mariana Islands Nature Alliance
- Mark Rabauliman - Northern Islands Mayor's Office
- Ramon Dela Cruz - Saipan Mayor's Office
- Frank Villagomez - NMFS PIFSC
- Mark Cruz - Joint Region Marianas
- Pedro Itibus - Council Member

Others in attendance included Kitty Simonds (online), Mark Mitsuyasu, Joshua DeMello, and Angela Dela Cruz (Council staff); Clay Tam and Alex Min (Pacific Island Fisheries Group); Steve McKagan (National Marine Fisheries Service); Ed Camacho (Commonwealth Bureau of Military Affairs); Mike Tenorio (Division of Fish and Wildlife); Max Garcia and ShirleyAnn Deleon Guerrero (Lyknr); John Gourley (Micronesia Environmental Services); Marissa Flores

(House Representative); Liana Hofschneider and Herman Tudela (Matua Council for Native Chamorro Advancement)

2. Opening Remarks

The Lieutenant Governor welcomed attendees to the meeting and expressed appreciation for their participation. He informed attendees that the Governor would be returning from Washington, D.C., the following day. The Lieutenant Governor emphasized the significance of fisheries to the local economy and the livelihoods of many community members. He highlighted the upcoming Wahoo Tournament scheduled for the following weekend and expressed optimism for productive discussions and positive outcomes from the meeting. Additionally, he acknowledged the less-than-ideal weather conditions on the day of the meeting but reiterated his gratitude for the attendees' presence. He concluded his remarks by encouraging participants to enjoy their stay.

3. Overview of the CNMI REAC

Mark Mitsuyasu, Council staff, gave an overview of the REAC role and responsibility in the Council process. The REAC was formed when the Council transitioned from species-based fishery management plans to fishery ecosystem plans. This shift aimed to provide a more comprehensive, ecosystem-based approach to fishery management.

The REAC is composed of representatives from government agencies, businesses, and non-governmental organizations that have responsibilities within or conduct work related to the fishery ecosystem. The REAC serves an advisory role, providing recommendations to the Council on issues that impact the fishery ecosystem in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI).

Report on Review of 2023 REAC Recommendations

Angela Dela Cruz, Council staff, gave a review on the 2023 CNMI Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee recommendations to the Council:

1. Recommends the Council re-engage with the community based fishery management plan with the Northern Islands' Mayor Office and other stakeholders;
2. Encourages NMFS to tailor its EEJ regional community engagement plan for each island in the CNMI (Saipan, Rota, Tinian and the Northern Islands); and
3. Recommends the PIFSC FRMD and CNMI DFW communicate their plans and efforts for electronic data collection to the general public.

4. Regulatory Review, Community Consultation and Scenario Planning through IRA

Mitsuyasu stated that the Council has received funding through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to support governance initiatives to understand and address changing climates and impacts to communities. To achieve this, the Council is embarking on a set of projects, including regulatory review, community consultation, and scenario planning.

a. Fishery Monitoring and Management Regime

i. Federal Management

1. Mariana Archipelago FEP Overview

Federal fisheries in the CNMI are included, along with Guam, in the Mariana Archipelago Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), which was developed by the Council in 2006. The Mariana FEP provides the framework by which fisheries in federal waters are managed, including, but not limited to, permitting, prohibitions, and quotas.

Council staff, Josh DeMello, provided a presentation on the Mariana FEP, including its key components, details on the Mariana fisheries, and federal regulations for the REAC to review. The REAC may consider any potential gaps in regulations within the FEP or changes that might be needed to ensure alignment with CNMI regulations or to enhance climate resilience in the fisheries.

Ramon Dela Cruz questioned why the brochure stated that jurisdiction extended only up to 2 miles. DeMello referred him to the website, which contains the most up-to-date information.

2. Marianas Small-Boat Economic Survey

Justin Hospital, NMFS Pacific Island Fisheries Science Center staff, provided background information on the 2018 survey and the planned March–April 2025 Mariana Small-Boat Economic Survey. PDF copies of the 2018 report are available upon request. The upcoming survey will include kayaks and will focus on social and economic data collection to support fisheries management through the use of the BSIA and National Standard 8 (NS8). He also stated that Lynkr will assist NMFS in conducting the survey in Saipan, Tinian, and Rota.

Mark Rabauliman, Northern Mayors Office, inquired whether it was possible to distinguish between fishers from Saipan and the Northern Islands or to differentiate catches from these areas.

Hospital responded that it would be possible and encouraged engagement with Lynker survey staff to facilitate the distribution of survey forms within the community. He noted that, for confidentiality purposes, at least three observations are required to include data in the formal report, but accommodations could be made to address community-specific needs.

Remington added that if there is interest in island-specific data collection for Tinian and Rota, Lynker staff, Max Garcia and ShirleyAnn Deleon Guerrero, will gather information specific to those areas and the Northern Islands.

Mitsuyasu mentioned that Northern Islands representatives had previously noted difficulties in separating Northern Islands residents from Saipan residents in the Census and expressed a desire to ensure that data distinctions are clear.

Hospital confirmed that one of the survey questions asks fishers to identify their village of residence. While past survey results separated the islands, there has been no prior data collection from the Northern Islands. He welcomed this opportunity to improve data representation.

It was recommended that the survey specifically identify residents of the Northern Islands separately from Saipan residents, as many Northern Island residents are currently displaced and living in Saipan.

3. NMFS 2025 Mariana Archipelago Survey

NMFS Pacific Island Fisheries Science Center staff, Francisco Villagomez, provided background information and an update on the 2025 Mariana Archipelago survey. Initiated in 2000; and later this year; National Coral Reef Monitoring Program (NCRMP) plans to conduct surveys. Vessels would be in port from June 1–6 before heading to the Northern Islands. An outreach event was planned for the first Monday of June.

Villagomez stated that there would also be a pelagic research program survey running from April to July, as well as a life history program, which would conduct a two- to three-week cruise to collect bottomfish (BF) data during that period.

Mark Rabauliman inquired about the process following data collection, asking where the data would go and who would receive it. Villagomez explained that the data would be housed at NOAA Fisheries, where colleagues would compile it and produce a report. Additionally, preliminary data from previous trips might be shared during the outreach event. A QR code was offered for easy public access.

ii. CNMI Management Efforts

1. Status of CNMI Mandatory Data Implementation Plan

CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) staff, Mike Tenorio, provided information on the implementation of the mandatory data collection. The CNMI developed a Mandatory Data Implementation Plan as mandated by CNMI regulation [§ 85-30.5-001](#) that requires the Department of Land and Natural Resources to “establish a catch recording and reporting system for any individual and/or business engaged in the commercial harvest, purchase and/or sale of marine life products caught within the Commonwealth waters.” DFW has been conducting outreach efforts to commercial purchasers and is working on holding information sessions for commercial harvesters and the public to inform them about these regulations.

Mark Rebauliman asked for clarification on the distinction between commercial and subsistence fishing and whether reporting was voluntary. Tenorio explained that any sale of fish qualifies as commercial activity. The regulation requires tracking any fish sold to vendors, with the primary goal of gaining a better understanding of fishing activities.

Rebauliman pointed out gaps in the mandate and suggested partnering with business licensing agencies to ensure all stakeholders are informed.

Pete Itibus highlighted the importance of data collection for understanding fish stocks and questioned how catch from fishers traveling from Guam to the Northern Islands, but selling in Guam, would be tracked. Tenorio clarified that such catch would not be captured in CNMI data but would likely appear in Guam’s data collection efforts.

Gene Weaver referenced past reports indicating that Guam’s bottomfish stock had been classified as overfished but was later reassessed. He inquired whether such changes were influenced by data collection. Tenorio confirmed that the issue had been raised with PIFSC, which likely incorporated the missing data to improve accuracy. He emphasized that sharing data with analysts helps refine assessments.

Weaver also asked about a past initiative where data was collected at the Fish Market in exchange for ice. Tenorio was unsure of its status and suggested that the Department of Agriculture (DOA) might have more information. Rosemary Camacho, Acting DFW Director clarified that the ice machine was funded through the Sustainable Fisheries Fund (SFF) under DLNR and indicated that if there was community interest, efforts could be made to revisit the program.

Regarding Guam fishers, Camacho mentioned that they were working with NOAA, but there were no fishing permits issued for the Northern Islands, and neither CNMI nor Guam was actively collecting data on these activities.

Jesse Stole questioned whether any studies were being conducted to determine seasonal fishing patterns for certain species. Tenorio explained that such research falls under the Fish Life History Program, which examines otoliths and gonads to determine spawning and reproductive periods. This work is being conducted by both DFW and NOAA. Stole then questioned whether the true market value of local fish was being captured. Tenorio responded that fish prices are market-driven and typically increase with high demand in restaurants.

Stole inquired about the possibility of implementing seasonal fishing laws for conservation. Tenorio acknowledged that such regulations could be introduced, but scientific evidence would be necessary before advocating for legislation. When Stole suggested that the current process seemed stagnant, Tenorio clarified that work was being done on multiple fronts.

Dave Benavente asked whether there was a list of species for which data was being collected, as well as any established timelines or quotas. Tenorio confirmed that data collection focused on key species in the market. Generally, two years of data is required for a species, with an additional two to three years needed to process and generate a report. However, he noted that using CNMI-specific data helps refine size restrictions for local fish stocks.

Tenorio highlighted several challenges in implementing the mandate, including unfunded mandate, as there is currently no dedicated funding to support full implementation. Limited capacity, as the current workforce is insufficient to manage the program effectively. As well as the need for additional personnel, as progress is contingent upon the availability of resources and staff. He emphasized that while efforts are ongoing, expanding the program will require additional support and funding.

b. Climate Impacts on Fisheries and Communities

i. Agency initiatives addressing Climate Impacts on fisheries and coastal resources

Council staff, Mark Mitsuyasu, encouraged REAC members to discuss climate impacts on the ecosystem that could affect fisheries and the fishing community.

Steve McKagan from the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) provided an update on reef studies that have been conducted since 2012. These studies examine various environmental factors impacting reef habitats, including climate-related responses following Typhoons Yutu and Soudelor. He noted that a report on Tinian's reef conditions would be available in the coming months and offered to share documents and datasets related to ongoing research.

Dave Benavente from the Mariana Islands Nature Alliance reported that funding had been received for marine debris removal as part of the Super Typhoon Yutu recovery fund. A final report detailing the debris collected, locations surveyed, and types of debris removed had recently been submitted and would be published soon. MINA is also collaborating with the Coastal Resources Management Office (CRM) on coral nursery restoration efforts.

Zabrina Cruz, Director of the Division of Environmental Quality (DEQ) announced that funding had been secured from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for a surface water environmental protection grant. This initiative includes Saipan's first heavy metals project, with plans to expand research to other islands. The project will focus on monitoring Saipan's streams and coastal waters to address water quality concerns.

Mitsuyasu inquired whether the study would establish a baseline for water quality, to which Cruz confirmed that it would.

Mike Tenorio from the DFW discussed ongoing projects that build upon existing work. He noted that underwater surveys are now being used to monitor coral bleaching in surveyed areas. Additionally, funding has been allocated for coral restoration efforts.

McKagan added that the Coral Reef Initiative (CRI) under the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) has been involved in restoration work, alongside funding from the Johnston Applied Marine Sciences (JAMS). JAMS has been conducting coral fragmentation and propagation efforts, and CNMI has emerged as a leader in coral restoration. He noted that this would be the final year of PIRO funding, as the initiative would transition to full funding from larger corporations. Efforts are underway to prioritize reefs, and as restoration programs continue to grow, more opportunities for expansion will become available.

Tenorio mentioned that another proposal had been submitted under the competitive State Wildlife Grants (SWG) program. While not specifically focused on climate change, the project emphasizes marine protected areas (MPAs) and restoration work.

Mark Cruz highlighted infrastructure projects in Micronesia that address climate change and storm impacts. He noted that the Department of Defense (DOD) assists nations and allied partners in assessing vulnerabilities related to these events. In certain cases, the DOD also provides support for infrastructure improvements.

ii. Community-based fishery management plan

Mark Mitsuyasu gave an overview of past and ongoing efforts on community-based fishery management plans to drive future effective and inclusive strategies. He had also given an example of the Malesso Plan in Guam that could be reflected in the CNMI. Recent discussions with Northern Islands Mayor Valentino Taisacan focused on establishing a more structured and consistent dialogue between the Council and his office. This initiative aims to enhance communication, track progress more effectively, and ensure the continuity of ongoing efforts.

iii. FishMaps

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, provided an overview of FishMaps, an initiative launched by the Hawaii AP in response to offshore wind development and monument expansions. The initiative aims to ensure that traditional fishing grounds remain accessible to the fishing community for future generations. He provided an overview of a 2016 project that logged down information focused on nearshore areas.

Weaver inquired whether the impact of wind turbines on migratory species and birds had been considered. DeMello responded that these factors are taken into account, noting that wind turbines cannot be placed in areas with significant military activity. Additionally, DeMello highlighted that whales are also affected by underwater cables associated with these installations.

iv. Future Scenarios for CNMI small-boat fisheries

Mark Mitsuyasu provided an overview of future climate scenarios, explaining that weather events occur regularly in the CNMI, and over time, the average conditions of these events define the region's climate. He noted that if the frequency or intensity of weather events changes, the overall climate will also shift. While both natural cycles and human activities may contribute to these changes, it is essential to consider their potential impacts on fisheries in the CNMI. Scientists anticipate that ocean waters will become warmer and more acidic, with rising sea levels and shifts in precipitation patterns.

5. Community Fishery Issues

a. Military Activities on Local Fisheries

Mark Cruz, representing Joint Region Marianas, provided REAC members with a briefing on the Department of Defense (DoD) organization, its roles, and responsibilities in Micronesia and the Marianas. He also shared updates on ongoing and anticipated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) projects.

Ramon Dela Cruz inquired about the accessibility of North Field. Cruz emphasized that maintaining public access to beaches and tourist sites is a priority for the Tinian Mayor's Office, though restrictions will remain in place during construction for safety reasons. He noted that during military exercises, coordination is conducted through the Commonwealth Bureau of Military Affairs (CBMA), with plans providing specific dates and times.

Laurie Peterka raised concerns about the potential military takeover of Tinian Harbor and its impact on fishers. Cruz clarified that the DoD does not take ownership of the harbor; rather, it remains under the Commonwealth Ports Authority (CPA). While the military may request access, the harbor remains under local control, similar to other CNMI ports.

Ed Camacho highlighted his role in coordinating all military-related matters and DoD activities through CBMA. He noted that vessels have been turned away in the past due to biosecurity concerns, emphasizing the importance of protecting the Commonwealth's natural resources, including fisheries. He underscored the region's commitment to peace through strength, ensuring security while maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. Camacho also raised concerns about aquatic invasive species, acknowledging the challenges in addressing them and the need for clear regulations to manage their spread.

Cruz reiterated that DoD remains committed to adhering to NEPA and EIS requirements while promoting regional stability. He emphasized that the military is prepared to address external threats but prioritizes maintaining peace.

Camacho suggested that CNMI should be developed as a rest and relaxation (R&R) destination, highlighting its beaches, hotels, and tourism potential.

b. Fishery Development/Training Opportunities

Alex Min, PIFG, provided an overview of projects and opportunities under the community consultation planning efforts within the IRA framework, aimed at inspiring the next generation of commercial fishers. A key initiative discussed was a pilot training project designed to support commercial fisheries and establish a framework to sustain the industry in the region. Min emphasized the importance of this initiative, noting that the average age of the fishing fleet is

over 50, a trend that is not unique to the region but is observed across the broader area. He highlighted the lack of a clear pathway for new entrants into the commercial fishing sector, compounded by rising expenses, which have created significant barriers to entry. Min stressed that the project is vital for sustaining long-term economic opportunities for local communities.

Min's request to the attendees was twofold: first, to consider joining the steering committee for this initiative, and second, to assist in identifying young fishers or potential new entrants who are eager to learn about commercial fishing and are passionate about the industry.

c. Supporting Local Seafood vs Seafood Imports

Mark Fitchett, Council staff, provided a status update on fisheries development in the Marianas. The CNMI enjoys privileges as a small island developing state and participating territory on the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). Currently, CNMI does not have an established commercial pelagic fishery; however, CNMI wishes to develop a commercial pelagic fishery there may be opportunities due to its location and target species that are not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. Historically, there were five US flagged vessels that were based in the CNMI and interest with foreign countries (Japan, Korea and China) to enter agreements through the Pacific insular area fishing agreements (PIAFA) to fish in CNMI waters. If there are charter agreements or joint ventures, then these foreign countries would fish in compliance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Kitty Simonds, Council Executive Director, inquired whether the CNMI agrees to allow foreign-flagged fishing vessels within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

6. Public Comment

Steve McKagan inquired about the distinction between federal and non-federal waters. It was clarified that state waters extend from 0 to 3 miles offshore and are managed by the state, while federal waters extend from 3 to 200 miles offshore within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and are managed by the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Leanna Sablan Hofschneider with the Matua Council for Native Chamorro Advancement, expressed concern about restricted access to a sacred site on Tinian (Chigit) and the availability of traditional medicinal plants that are located in enclosed military areas. She also inquired about the status of a whale carcass that had previously been present there. In response, it was noted that a survey would be conducted, and the issue would be raised in an upcoming meeting with a women's group in Tinian the following week.

Kitty Simonds requested that the REAC provide a list of all federal regulations they find unfavorable.

Mark Cruz suggested that the group also review regulations from Hawaii that may be applicable to the CNMI, potentially offering solutions to local challenges.

Leanna Hofschneider (Office of Native Chamorro Advancement) expressed a desire to hear feedback from the people in the villages and encouraged more fishermen to attend meetings. She also urged the group to support efforts to reinstate the traditional naming of shorelines, areas, and islands, similar to the practice of using original names in the Fishery Data Management (FDM) system.

7. Other Business

No other business.

8. Discussion and Recommendations

The CNMI Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee made the following recommendations:

- 1) **Regarding implementation of the mandatory data reporting**, the REAC recommends the Council request CNMI DFW:
 - a) Collaborate with the CNMI Department of Commerce to enhance outreach efforts to business owners on the data reporting regulations to clarify requirements and promote training opportunities for commercial purchasers and harvesters.
 - b) Work with PIFSC to better capture fishing effort and landings from the Northern islands vs the southern islands of Rota, Tinian and Saipan; also, work to capture effort and catch occurring in CNMI (Rota & Northern Island) that are landed in Guam.
- 2) **Regarding Fishery Development**, the REAC recommends the Council request CNMI DLNR provide an update on the free ice being distributed at Garapan Public Market as an incentive for fishermen to participate in the DFW data collection programs.
- 3) **Regarding the PIFSC Marianas Boat Fishing Survey**, the REAC recommends the Council request NMFS PIFSC socioeconomic surveyors take extra effort to identify and distinguish Northern Islands residents versus Saipan residents.

- 4) **Regarding the REAC membership**, the REAC recommends the Council invite Talaya Club, ISLA, 500 Sails, and Matua Council for Native Chamorro Advancement to become members of the CNMI REAC.

Meeting adjourned: 12:11 p.m., ChST

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