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

Tuesday, March 18, 2025, 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. (SST); 7 p.m. – 9 p.m. (HST)

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

Nathan Ilaoa, American Samoa Advisory Panel (AP) Vice-Chair, opened the meeting at 6:04 p.m. Members in attendance included Gene Pan, Nonu Tuisamoa, Dustin Snow, Jerome Ierome, and Edgar Feliciano. Members excused included Joe Hamby. Clay Tam, Ray Tulafono, and Keith Ah Soon were absent.

Others in attendance included Felix Penalosa, Zach Yamada, Asuka Ishizaki, Joshua DeMello, Mark Mitsuyasu, Mark Fitchett, Archie Soliai, Domingo Ochavillo, and Trude Ledoux-Sunia.

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

Felix Penalosa, Council staff, provided a review of the last AP recommendations from the meeting held on December 6, 2024.

The AP Vice Chair asked an AP member whether NOAA and Council staff had engaged with American Samoa longline owners between the December and March meetings.

An AP member responded that they had not been engaged. However, they read that the costs will be passed on to Hawaiian fishery operators, which adds to an already difficult financial situation.

The AP Vice Chair acknowledged this concern, stating that the issue would be discussed further in the meeting. He noted it was unfortunate that they had not received input from the longline owners.

An AP member asked Taotasi Archie Soliai, who was in attendance, for an update on the status of the DMWR Director position.

Soliai confirmed that no additional information was available. He said that after speaking with the Governor, he is currently off the island but is considering potential candidates. The AP member agreed that this is an important position to fill.

Another AP member expressed concern over the search process, questioning why candidates were being sought from outside when there were qualified individuals in American Samoa. They suggested that the AP Vice Chair would be an ideal candidate for the position.

An AP member inquired whether another member could meet with the Governor to recommend the AP Vice Chair for the position formally and asked about what the AP Vice Chair would need to prepare for consideration.

An AP member mentioned that they had already spoken to the Governor and had recommended the AP Vice Chair for the position.

### **3. Council Fisheries Issues**

#### **A. American Samoa BMUS Revision**

Joshua DeMello, Council Staff, provided an overview of the American Samoa Bottomfish Management Unit Species (BMUS) revision. The report discussed the revision of the BMUS in the American Samoa Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), aimed at evaluating the species to ensure they require federal conservation and management. The BMUS list has evolved, with the number of species decreasing from 60 in the original 1986 plan to 11 in the 2019 revision. The AS AP will consider three alternatives: maintaining the current BMUS list (Alternative 1), revising the list to include rarer species (Alternative 2), or focusing only on species with sufficient data (Alternative 3).

Each alternative has different expected outcomes. Alternative 1 proposes no changes, maintaining the current BMUS list and continuing management through Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) and Accountability Measures (AMs). Alternative 2 proposes expanding the BMUS list to include rarer species and reclassifying some current BMUS as Ecosystem Components, resulting in slight positive impacts on the fishery and communities. Alternative 3, focused on data-rich species, would reduce the BMUS to 6 species, also with minimal impact on the fishery. The AS AP will provide feedback and make recommendations on which alternative to pursue, considering factors such as bycatch, habitat, monitoring, and the needs of fishing communities.

The AP Vice Chair asked whether the decision between Alternatives 2 and 3 came down to simplicity. DeMello explained that PIRO did not favor having the 13 species due to the presence of rare species that were not captured in the data. PIRO also preferred avoiding the development of accountability measures for these rare species. While Alternative 3 could result in lower catch limits, it would require monitoring any unexpected catch.

The AP Vice-Chair noted that the three members present agreed that the status quo was undesirable, reflecting the conclusions of the previous meeting.

Another AP member supported alternative 3, focusing on deep snappers. Three other members also showed support for alternative 3, with one member indicating his support through the Webex chat.

Another AP member raised concerns about rare species being discarded if they are listed, although they emphasized the importance of considering them. He compared it to the management of mangrove ecosystems.

#### **B. Updates on Hawaii and American Samoa Longline Fisheries Crew Training Requirement**

Asuka Ishizaki, Council staff, provided an update on the development of the Hawaii and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement. The Council took initial action on the regulatory amendment to implement a crew training requirement at its 201st meeting and scheduled final action for the June 2025 meeting. Prior to the 201<sup>st</sup> meeting, the Action Team

received advice from NOAA General Counsel that the initial approach for regulatory implementation (i.e., requiring crew training certificate to be on board) would not be consistent with the biological opinion (BiOp) terms and conditions (T&C). Specifically, the T&C included language that required a trained person to be on deck during hauling operations. The Council heard two potential regulatory implementation approaches at the 201<sup>st</sup> meeting and directed the Action Team to refine the approach in advance of final action, providing an update at the March meeting. The Council also requested that NMFS make the crew training program accessible to fishery participants and work with the Council, Hawaii, and American Samoa longline fishery representatives to explore an appointment scheduling system that would facilitate greater participation in the training sessions.

Following the 201<sup>st</sup> Council meeting, the Action Team met to review the regulatory approach. The Action Team adopted a two-component approach, involving (1) crew certification, which requires at least one certified crew member per vessel to be onboard with the certificate, and (2) a person-on-deck requirement, with a preference for having one trained person immediately available to direct and oversee the handling of protected species. Additionally, following the December 2024 Council meeting, NMFS PIRO revisited the T&C and determined that the language should be refined to achieve the desired outcome for improved protected species handling and reduced post-interaction mortality throughout the longline fleets. The revised Terms and Conditions (T&C) would require longline vessels to carry at least two trained personnel with approved training, with at least one trained person on deck when an ESA-listed species interaction occurs during gear retrieval.

As of February 2025, the pilot training program had trained 576 individuals from 114 vessels. Still, challenges such as declining new vessel attendance, changes in crew transportation, and reduced funding for translation services necessitate a new training access plan utilizing in-person video-based training with a comprehension quiz. The AP was asked to provide feedback on the revised regulatory approach in preparation for the June final action.

AP members sought clarification on whether this new training requirement would duplicate the current NOAA training. Ishizaki clarified that American Samoa's captains and crew already participate in training, while crew training in Hawaii remains inconsistent. This amendment is designed to fill that gap. An AP member noted that in American Samoa, crews undergo both written and practical training locally. Ishizaki added that ensuring the crew certificate is onboard should not significantly change operations.

The vice chair questioned whether the requirement applied to all crew members. Ishizaki explained that the NOAA General Counsel clarified that it would not mandate training for all crew members.

### **C. Longline Electronic Monitoring Implementation Feasibility**

Mark Fitchett, Council staff, presented on the status of developing a proposal for the Pelagic FEP to implement electronic monitoring (EM) in longline fisheries. The Council took

initial action at its December meeting, directing an Action Team to develop an amendment that would authorize the use of EM in pelagic longline fisheries for the reliable estimation of protected species interactions. The amendment would phase it in as an optional program through 2027 until permanent resources are available to implement a mandatory program. The Action Team is in the process of developing a proposed amendment for final action at the Council's June 2025 meeting. NMFS plans to fund systems for an EM program in longline fisheries, which could be phased in over three years (2025-2027) and may eventually replace human observer programs. Funding for human observers remains uncertain, given the increased costs and observer coverage is expected to decline to 5%, which is the current international minimum. Staff discussed components needed for developing an authorized EM program, such as a vessel monitoring plan and changes to the FEP to use EM as a standardized bycatch reporting mechanism. The proposed purpose and need for an EM program are primarily to estimate protected species populations, address a need to account for a declining observer program, and prevent non-compliance with statutory requirements that could result in interruptions to the fishery. Draft alternatives for future consideration were presented as the status quo, no action, a mandatory program (with three sub-alternatives), and an optional program.

An AP Member expressed concern about the financial burden on vessel owners, particularly the estimated \$10,000 per vessel for EM installation. Recommended avoiding additional costs to vessel owners. Fitchett noted that the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) discussed EM costs and profit margins. Emphasized that the Council will hear further input from the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO).

An AP Member questioned if EM would require internet connectivity. Fitchett clarified that data is collected at the end of each trip, and live streaming is not expected due to its high costs.

Another AP Member agreed with concerns about the financial burden on vessel owners, especially given the American Samoa longline fleet's economic challenges. Highlighted the importance of considering socioeconomic impacts.

An AP Member recommended optional implementation rather than a mandatory program to prevent additional costs, while another member suggested supporting 100% observer coverage if possible.

An AP member shared concerns about unintentional equipment damage and associated repair costs. Clarified initial assumptions of EM being a live feed and expressed difficulty in absorbing unforeseen expenses.

***The American Samoa AP recommends the Council take into account the following considerations in further developing the EM action:***

- Maintaining cost responsibility for implementation of EM on the agency and not American Samoa longline (ASLL) operators, noting the economic hardship experienced by the fishery.
- Prioritize the implementation of EM on ASLL vessels on a voluntary basis as it is phased in
- The need to conduct outreach as soon as possible with the ASLL industry

#### **4. Regulatory Review, Community Consultation, and Planning through IRA**

##### **A. Fishery Monitoring and Management Regime**

###### **i. American Samoa FEP Overview**

Joshua DeMello provided an overview of the American Samoa FEP and regulations. The AP may provide comments on regulations that need to be removed or amended.

###### **ii. American Samoa Territorial FMP Development**

Domingo Ochavillo provided an overview and status of the American Samoa Territorial FMP. The AP may provide comments on the territorial FMP. The draft American Samoa Bottomfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) outlines several key elements. It begins by defining the purpose and need for the management plan, including its scope, the current stock status, and objectives. Ochavillo provided an overview of the fishery, detailing the current state of fishery data collection through shore-based, boat-based, and commercial vendor systems, as well as other data streams, including electronic reporting, DMWR boat registry, PIFSC socioeconomics, coral reef monitoring, and biosampling. Furthermore, the FMP describes both territorial and federal management measures currently in place. Territorial measures include annual proclamations, licensing and permitting, gear restrictions, species prohibitions, spatial management through marine protected areas (MPAs), and the Canadian Fisheries and Aquaculture Management Plan (CFMP). Federal management measures encompass annual catch limits, gear restrictions, permits and fees, spatial management, and regulations regarding interactions with protected species.

The draft FMP also addresses the need for review and update of the FMP, highlighting several key areas for consideration. These include defining the roles of various stakeholders, such as DMWR, the Council, PIFSC, and the AP, and finalizing the list of Bottomfish Management Unit Species (BMUS), especially in light of upcoming federal actions. The review process will also involve revisiting the FMP objectives in relation to current issues and threats to the fishery. The plan proposes reviewing management measures, including mandatory reporting, vessel registration and notification, and catch-based management. Finally, the FMP will address implementation aspects, including monitoring, stock assessment, and the review and enforcement of management measures.

An AP Member recommended involving stakeholders in the review process and initiating discussions with the AP to evaluate priorities and themes in the FMP objectives. Suggest reviewing these aspects at the next informal meeting.

Ochavillo agreed to discuss the FMP at the next meeting further and coordinate with Fishery Program staff to engage the community in the process.

##### **B. Climate Impacts on Fisheries and Communities**

###### **i. FISHMAPs**

Zach Yamada, Council staff, provided an overview of FishMaps. FishMaps is a project launched by the Hawaii AP to characterize the fisheries for bottomfish, pelagic, coral reef, crustacean, and precious corals, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional fishing knowledge and historical fishing data. The goal of this project is to ensure that fishing communities can continue to fish with potential spatial management actions, provide the fishing community a seat at the decision-making table alongside managers and developers, and identify specific communities that should be consulted.

The AP vice chair inquired about any plans for American Samoa.

Yamada responded that, at the moment, the Council is engaging in IRA consultations to lay the groundwork with the Marianas and Hawaii communities and that it will be introduced to American Samoa after the June Council meeting.

## **ii. Future Scenarios for American Samoa small-boat fisheries**

Mark Fitchett provided an overview of scenario planning, emphasizing the intent to anticipate different possible futures. The big boat scenario planning will start in May, examining climate scenarios and considering whether business will remain the same or change, as well as what can be done to anticipate these changes. The Council could also look at potential futures for increased or decreased fishing productivity.

The AP Vice chair noted that they will be hearing more in June and that there are already people lined up to be included in those discussions.

Fitchett added that American Samoa will represent the Council and will provide an update and that they also have an SSC working group that will be part of the process.

## **C. Community Fisheries**

### **i. Fishery Development/Training Opportunities**

Zach Yamada, Council staff, provided an overview of the IRA pilot project to train and develop commercial fishermen. Over the years, the Council has discussed the challenges of the current labor landscape and the need for additional workers to support the fishing industry. This project focuses on training interested fishers across the region to acquire the necessary skill set to work in the fisheries sector, including roles such as motor mechanics, deckhands, and fabricators, and implementing these skills within the fishing industry. This could also include a focus on developing fisheries for underutilized stocks, such as sharks, monkfish, or deepwater shrimp.

An Advisory Panel member stated that discussions are scheduled for June and assured attendees that members will receive invitations to participate.

An Advisory Panel member inquired whether boat captain licenses would be encompassed within the scope of that project.

Yamada replied that inclusion was possible and that the project remains under development.

DeMello added that a pilot program in Hawaii will be initiated to provide instruction on utilizing various fishing gears and will incorporate captain's licenses.

## **5. Advisory Panel Strategic Planning for 2025**

### **A. SFF: PSA Development**

### **B. Other AS AP Projects**

Penalosa and the AP Vice Chair provided an update on the status of AP projects included in the AP action plans. As of August 28, 2024, the AP had developed draft scripts and was in the

process of collecting video footage and photos. On February 3, 2025, the AP Vice Chair met with DMWR's Education Division and DOE Science Curriculum Director, Dr. Rose, during a Fishery Educator Project steering committee meeting for SFF. The Fishery Educator Project aims to provide educators with marine and fisheries-related educational resources, including video PSAs, in collaboration with the AP. The committee agreed to combine efforts to prevent duplication, with the DMWR Information Technology Coordinator leading the filming and editing of PSAs based on AP scripts in consultation with the AP. The AP will also participate in proposed teacher workshops under the Fishery Educator Project. The project is projected to be completed by July 2025.

The social media platform remains an effective tool for disseminating information to the public. The Advisory Panel Facebook page has been actively sharing information over the past month, including updates on meetings, fisheries issues, and other relevant topics. An AP member suggested that the information technology coordinator could visit his shop and showcase fisheries in action. Ilaoa added that the page could feature folks involved in the fisheries, putting a face on the fishery industry.

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Another AP member added that the social media page could feature certain folks involved in the fisheries, putting a face on the fishery industry.

## **6. Public Comment**

There were no requests for public comment.

## **7. Discussion and Recommendations**

The American Samoa AP made the following recommendations.

***Regarding American Samoa Bottomfish,*** the American Samoa AP recommends the Council take final action on Alternative 3 to revise the BMUS list to 6 species of deep snappers with species that have data for stock assessments.

***Regarding EM, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council take into account the following considerations in further developing the EM action:***

- Maintaining cost responsibility for implementation of EM on the agency and not American Samoa longline (ASLL) operators, noting the economic hardship experienced by the fishery.
- Prioritize implementation of EM on ASLL vessels on a voluntary basis as it is phased in
- The need to conduct outreach as soon as possible with the ASLL industry

## **8. Other Business**

An AP member discussed the Passport to Fishing pilot project, which involved 22 to 24 children. A local fishing club took the kids out and facilitated learning, with each child taking their passport to different stations. There are additional plans in the works, including those

involving children whose parents are part of the PPGFA. Additionally, the I'a Lapo'a fishing tournament is being enhanced and will have events in Apia and Tonga. An AP member congratulated Brian and Vera for running Passport to Fishing.

Another member suggested letting Vera know if they would like to include their outreach on the AP's Facebook page.

An AP member discussed the USCG requirement for US masters on all longline fleet boats as a significant issue for American Samoa's largest local fishery. The responses from the Coast Guard Rear Admiral were insulting, suggesting that people in American Samoa become naturalized citizens. He noted that the AP has made recommendations in the past, but this requirement poses a threat to the viability of our fishery. Additionally, the requirement for mainland-certified life rafts is costly, and there should be a neighboring island company that can provide that service.

Another AP member said that buying a new life raft might be more cost-effective.

An AP member suggested that the Council should ask the USCG if a local company can provide the service. Additionally, the AP member stated that American Samoa lost a valuable asset with the retirement of Frank Thompson. He noted that the yearly rotation of personnel from the local Marine Safety Detachment is disruptive. He suggested that the USCG District 14 should assign a local person to the local detachment.

Another AP member added to the topic regarding the master's requirement, noting that the USCG informed them that it would require a congressional amendment. He also noted that they have written to the American Samoa US Congressional Delegate about this issue. The AP member also mentioned that Apia provides life raft services recognized internationally and that the USCG wouldn't penalize the local longline fleet for using their services.

Another AP member asked if it was cheaper to get these services in Apia.

An AP member confirmed that it was much cheaper to go through Apia and that they would be exploring that option. He emphasized that the USCG would not penalize them and would like to get the consent in writing. The AP member also clarified that the type of life rafts in question was referred to as SOLAS life rafts.

**The meeting adjourned at 8:32 pm**