



## **Report of the Mariana Archipelago FEP CNMI Advisory Panel Meeting**

*Wednesday, May 28, 2025, 6:02 p.m. – 8 p.m. (ChST)*

Hybrid Meeting via Webex

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

Richard Farrel, CNMI Advisory Panel (AP) Vice Chair, opened the meeting at 6:02 p.m. (ChST). CNMI AP members in attendance included Michael Fleming, Perry Mesngon, Cecilio Raiukiulipiy, Ray Tebuteb, Lino Tenorio, Lawrence Concepcion, Anthony Guerrero, Dre Lizama. Lorna Iginoef was absent.

Others in attendance include Joshua DeMello, Zach Yamada, Angela Dela Cruz, Felix Reyes (Council Staff), Erin Bohaboy (PIFSC), Alex Min (Pacific Island Fisheries Group).

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

Angela Dela Cruz, Council staff, provided a status review of the recommendations from the last AP meeting held on February 26, 2025.

Vice-Chair Richard Farrell directed AP members to collaborate with CNMI Council staff on drafting a letter to the Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). The letter will address the economic impacts on pre-positioned ships, propose an updated survey to assess the condition of the reefs, and recommend avenues for mitigating the loss of fishing opportunities. Once drafted, the letter will be reviewed by the Council Chair and Executive Director prior to submission to Governor Arnold I. Palacios.

Council staff reminded the AP that the issue of introduced species will be addressed during the regulatory review process under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

The Vice-Chair noted that a video of a school of catfish at Sugar Dock, Saipan, was shared in the AP group chat by a member. Another member reported sightings of catfish near the bridge at American Memorial Park, Saipan. Proper species identification will be sought from relevant experts to determine further action.

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

#### **A. 2024 CNMI SAFE Report**

Angela Dela Cruz, Council staff, presented highlights from the 2024 Archipelagic and Pelagic Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Reports. These reports covered the performance of Council-managed fisheries, international fisheries modules, and ecosystem factors influencing fishery dynamics in the CNMI. Key findings included a continued decline in bottomfish landings, with a notable drop in 2024 to approximately 5,000 pounds from an average of 56,000 pounds in previous years. Catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) also fell to its lowest level since 2010–2011. Emperor fish were the most frequently recorded species in creel surveys, while parrotfish became the dominant species in commercial reef fish data, marking a shift from prior years when Atulai (*Selar crumenophthalmus*) was prevalent. Pelagic trolling activities experienced significant declines, resulting in the lowest estimated number of troll trips

and total catch in over a decade. This trend was primarily driven by decreased landings of tuna, ono, and mahi. However, blue marlin catches showed a slight increase. The report also included recommendations for enhancing data collection, which the Council may consider during upcoming meetings.

AP members expressed concern that market data may not always be reliable. One member noted that reef fish, particularly parrotfish, are currently dominating local markets due to high local demand. Another member reported that buyers have been more selective, focusing on consistent, local customers rather than tourists. Due to the economic downturn, he advised fishers to refrain from fishing unless there is a confirmed market for their catch to avoid unnecessary expenses.

One AP member encouraged the AP to strategize on how best to motivate fishers to share their data with the CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). He referenced current data collection avenues, including the Catch-It Log-It program, school-organized summer derbies, and private sector initiatives. He said fishers are willing to provide data but asked on its usage and significance. He expressed interest in expanding data collection efforts in the CNMI and cited a recent incident involving a burned sea turtle and hatchlings at Marine Beach, Kagman, as an example of why greater community engagement and transparency are needed.

Another member observed that the number of bottomfish fishers had declined in 2024, potentially resulting in reduced data availability. He also noted a decrease in tuna availability in the 2025 markets, though the cause remains unclear.

#### **B. 2025 CNMI Bottomfish Stock Assessment Update**

Erin Bohaboy, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC), provided an overview of the 2025 bottomfish stock assessment update for the CNMI. A comprehensive stock assessment was previously conducted in 2019, with the benchmark established in 2017. The 2025 update incorporated estimation catch data and updated CPUE data from 2018 to 2023. Due to data gaps, boat-based creel survey data from 2024 were not included.

The 2023 stock status indicates that the bottomfish stock is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. This is consistent with the findings of the 2019 assessment. However, the harvest rate has declined since 2017. The probability of overfishing ( $P^*$ ) is estimated at 40%, resulting in a proposed five-year annual catch limit (ACL) of 71,000 pounds. Despite the lack of data for 2024, the ACL calculation is not expected to be adversely affected, as the uncertainty has decreased due to improved data quality in prior years.

An AP member recommended that the stock assessment data be presented in a more accessible format to enable greater understanding and engagement among fishers and students.

Another member requested updated bottom mapping data from PIFSC to aid in planning fishing trips.

#### **4. Council Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Project Update**

##### **a. Scenario Planning**

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, reported that contracts have been initiated for large-vessel fishery scenario planning and the contractors plan to conduct workshops in Hawaii over fall and before new years and in American Samoa, in the first and second quarter of 2026. He said that more information will be available in September once the steering committee has been convened.

He also said that a small-boat fishery scenario planning will take place with small-boat fishers from around the region which will likely be held in 2026. He noted that the IRA community meetings will be used to identify participants and continue the discussions.

#### **b. Regulatory Review**

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, provided an update on the Council's IRA projects on regulatory review stating that a contractor should be starting next month and will be looking at FEP and local regulations. They will look at the regulations to determine if the region's fisheries are climate-ready, or flexible enough to be responsive to things like climate change. The AP should be thinking about regulations that should be removed, determining what is good, bad, needs work. Later this year, the Council hopes to have results of the review to share with the community.

#### **c. Community Consultation**

Alex Min, Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG), provided an update on the ongoing IRA community consultation project. The initiative includes a series of community meetings and a vocational fisheries course scheduled for March 2025. The meetings began in late February and concluded in March, totaling seven sessions across the region. These gatherings were designed to engage the public and gather feedback on current regulations, challenges, and barriers to fishing.

Participants were asked to share their observations regarding environmental changes, existing policies that may hinder fishing activities, and their perspectives on the future of fishing for themselves and future generations. A recurring theme emphasized the role of fishers in feeding families and the critical connection between marine resource management and community well-being. Fishers noted observable shifts in seasonal patterns, with some seasonal runs occurring later than usual. Shark depredation was also highlighted as a significant concern, with increasing incidents threatening fisher livelihoods. Additional concerns were raised regarding the underrepresentation of certain communities (i.e., Rota and the Northern Islands) in landing data, despite active fishing in these areas.

Min presented video testimonials from community members expressing the cultural and economic importance of fishing. He stated that PIFG would continue hosting community meetings throughout the two-year duration of the project to identify and advance actions that support regional fishing communities. Applications for the vocational fisheries course are currently open. The course is scheduled to take place from September 10–18, 2025, in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

An AP member inquired about concerns related to military activity in the region. In response, Min confirmed that participants had raised concerns regarding the military build-up, particularly regarding restricted fishing access, water quality impacts from sedimentation, and the use of weapons during training exercises.

Another AP member recommended conducting a feasibility study on developing a large-scale fishery market in the CNMI, given the data indicating the region is not overfished. The member suggested exploring export opportunities to nearby Asian markets and emphasized the

importance of recognizing and engaging experienced fishers. They also encouraged PIFG to meet with additional fishers during future outreach trips.

One AP member proposed expanding programs that support fisher participation in data collection and fish tagging. These initiatives could help close data gaps by motivating broader community involvement.

Min acknowledged the gap between experienced fishers and newcomers to the industry and noted that capacity-building pathways, including potential export models targeting the Asian market, could support the region's economic development.

Vice-Chair Richard Farrell noted the AP's ongoing interest in developing a shelf-stable fisheries market. He requested training and informational resources on developing such markets.

Min agreed that value-added products are essential for community economic resilience. He referenced successful operations in Hawai'i, where fishers actively engage with processing facilities, and suggested that these models could serve as useful examples for implementation in the CNMI.

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

Richard Farrell, AP vice Chair, provided an overview of the status of the AP action plan and priorities. The plan included projects like the CNMI Fisher's Recognition Week, which includes spearfishing safety training and a fisher's forum, promote purchasing locally caught fish and promoting proper processing and handling of commercial fish.

The AP plans to develop a clear project timeline and implement a more rigorous screening and selection process for proposed initiatives. These changes aim to ensure that future projects yield measurable outcomes and align with the AP's strategic goals.

## **6. Public Comment**

There were no request for public comments.

## **7. Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Regarding CNMI Stock Assessment,**

*The CNMI AP recommends the Council request PIFSC to engage the community on making stock assessment data and reports more digestible for community consumption to encourage participation in data collection and career pathways in fisheries science.*

### **Regarding Marianas Archipelago Data,**

*The CNMI AP recommends the Council inquire with PIFSC on the availability of recent mapping activities in the Marianas for CNMI fishers to utilize when conducting fishing trips in the Marianas.*

### **Regarding Safety at Sea,**

*The CNMI AP recommends the Council request USCG to work with the AP on conducting workshops/education and outreach on the use of GPS as they are now required for CNMI vessels and the use of EPIRBS for emergency use.*

**Regarding Marine Recreational Education Program,**

*The CNMI AP recommends the Council continue to support the continuation of the program in the Western Pacific Region.*

**8. Other Business**

An AP member reminded the panel that the Fisher's Proclamation Signing is scheduled to take place on May 30, 2025, from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. at Fishing Base, Garapan, Saipan. Additionally, a family event and fisher's forum will be held on June 1, 2025, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the same location. This event will serve as the official kickoff to a week of planned activities celebrating the fishing community. The AP member encouraged all panel members to attend, as the event is intended to honor and recognize the contributions of all fishers.