



WESTERN  
PACIFIC  
REGIONAL  
FISHERY  
MANAGEMENT  
COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE  
202nd MEETING OF THE  
WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

March 25-27, 2025 Council Plenary  
***Hybrid for Members and Public***  
*Hilton Hawaiian Village, Coral Ballroom*  
*Kalia, O'ahu, Hawai'i*

**Approved by Council:**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'W' followed by a long horizontal stroke that curves upwards at the end.

**William Sword, Chair**

**Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council**

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## **I. Welcome and Introductions**

The following members of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council were in attendance:

- Will Sword, chair (American Samoa)
- Judith Guthertz, vice chair (Guam)
- Sylvan Igisomar, vice chair (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands [CNMI]) and CNMI Department of Lands and Natural Resources (CNMI DLNR)
- Taotasi Archie Soliai, vice chair (American Samoa) and American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR)
- Pedro Itibus (CNMI)
- Shaelene Kamaka‘ala (Hawai‘i)
- Francisco Perez (Guam)
- Matthew Ramsey (Hawai‘i)
- Gerald Weaver (CNMI)
- Chelsa Muña, Guam Department of Agriculture (DOAG)
- David Sakoda, Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources (Hawai‘i DLNR) (designee for Dawn Chang)
- Sarah Malloy, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO)
- Brian Peck, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- Lt. Cmdr. Matt Guanci, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) (designee for Rear Adm. Sean Regan, commander for USCG District 14)

Also in attendance were Council Executive Director Kitty M. Simonds; Erik Franklin and Frank Camacho, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) designees; Christine Terada, Frederick Tucher, Elena Onaga, and Keith Hagg from the NOAA General Counsel Pacific Islands (GCPI). Vice chair Roger Dang (Hawai‘i) and Colin Brinkman, U.S. State Department were absent.

## **II. Approval of the 202nd CM Agenda**

The 202nd meeting agenda was approved by general consent.

## **III. Approval of the 201st CM Meeting Minutes**

Sword asked for a motion to approve the 201st meeting minutes.

Moved by Soliai, seconded by Guthertz.  
Motion passed.

#### **IV. Executive Director's Report**

Simonds opened the 202nd Council meeting by acknowledging governmental uncertainty affecting American livelihoods and international relationships, while affirming the regional Council's focus on fisheries issues. Key priorities include regulating seafood imports, economic development, marine area management, international agreements, and immigration reform for fishing crews. She cited an Executive Order (EO) requiring removal of 10 regulations for each new one and listed several existing regulations under review. Budget plans for 2025 mirror 2024 levels pending NMFS funding for joint programs and projects. At this meeting, the Council will take action on management measures for main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) uku, MHI deepwater shrimp, precious corals and U.S. catch limits for North Pacific striped marlin, updates on American Samoa bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) revision and Tier 6 acceptable biological catch (ABC) control rule. Initial action may be taken on requiring electronic monitoring (EM) for the American Samoa and Hawai'i longline fisheries. Simonds emphasized that government, not fishermen, should fund EM, which is estimated at under \$3 million annually. The success of EM relies on vessel operators and accurate reporting.

Simonds said the final rule on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) national marine sanctuary became effective March 3, 2025. She noted misalignment between sanctuary regulations and Council recommendations for cost recovery for native Hawaiian subsistence fishing. The sanctuary allows noncommercial fishing without sale or cost recovery, prompting the Council to reevaluate its recommendation. NOAA is reviewing the final sanctuary rule for alignment with current administration policies. The Council is also discussing potential amendments to its fishing regulations, especially regarding inconsistencies with sanctuary rules and the Monument Expansion Area (MEA). NOAA has withdrawn the proposed rule for the Pacific Islands Heritage National Marine Sanctuary from the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs review, pending discussions with the new NOAA leadership.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) seafood import ban will finally take effect Jan. 1, 2026, after nearly a decade since NMFS issued regulations to implement the provision. The Council sees this as a way to level the unequal treatment between foreign and domestic fisheries.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) supports various Council projects. Staff and partners including Kim Gordon, John Kaneko, the Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG) and Lynker are leading work on scenario planning, regulatory review of protected species, community consultation and capacity building. Initial community meetings in the CNMI, Guam and Hawai'i revealed two common issues: season shifts in runs and increased impacts of shark depredation, especially in the Mariana Archipelago and near Kona.

#### **V. Agency Reports**

##### **A. National Marine Fisheries Service**

##### **1. Pacific Islands Regional Office**

Malloy presented the PIRO report, starting with the changes in leadership under the Trump Administration, including: Howard Lutnick confirmed as secretary of commerce; Niel Jacobs nominated as the NOAA administrator but not yet confirmed; Emily Menashes acting as the NMFS administrator, for which no nomination has been made; Alexa Cole acting in the role of the deputy assistant secretary for International Fisheries; and Juan Carlo appointed as the NOAA deputy assistant administrator of International Affairs.

NMFS has not taken any regulatory actions since the December 2024 Council meeting due to the Department of Commerce (DOC) freeze on all regulations. Some actions such as opening or closing a fishery based on existing regulations can move forward, but everything else is frozen. There is no current process for getting normal regulatory actions through, but as soon as one becomes available, NMFS will start issuing other regulations that are in process, pending DOC determination of whether the regulations are still appropriate.

While NMFS continues its internal preparations to move forward on rulemaking in listing giant clams, extending 4(d) regulations to oceanic whitetip sharks, and designating critical habitat for green sea turtles, those regulations are all dependent on DOC's determinations. In the meantime, NMFS is reviewing comments and preparing briefing documents on these actions for the new administration. The issuance of NMFS findings on the petition to list 41 Indo-Pacific coral species has been paused, and there are no plans at this time to release the findings.

Malloy noted upcoming meeting dates and locations for the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), Pacific Advisory Committee for the WCPFC, the Northern Committee and joint Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission-WCPFC working group meetings.

Regarding the Marianas Trench Monument Advisory Committee (MTMAC), NMFS continues to respond to the committee's request for information on a variety of matters. Guam now has its own seat on the MTMAC. NMFS is developing a frequently asked questions (FAQ) list, in response to MTMAC's request, to explain how to obtain a fishing permit in the marine national monument.

All the major updates regarding the Sustainable Fisheries Division (SFD), including EM, striped marlin and specification packages, will be discussed during the meeting.

## **2. Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center**

Charles Littnan presented the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) report. The Deep-Sea Ecosystems of Sponges and Corals, Exploration, Investigation and Technology (DESCENT) Science Planning workshop held November 2024 included 46 scientists and managers. The group provided a list of priorities based on previous strategic guidance, including the Council's five-year research priorities—specifically, International Fisheries Priority 6, which focuses on the assessment of deepwater ecosystems, biological resources, management unit species (MUS), and exploration. During the 155th SSC meeting, members noted the need to fill information gaps, improve baseline information and update assessments of precious coral habitats off Hawai'i's shores. This Pacific DESCENT will conclude September 2028.

PIFSC Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division (FRMD) conducted Mariana Islands fishing community engagement and jurisdictional agencies training and workshops. FRMD travelled to Saipan Jan. 13-18, 2025, to meet with Saipan fishing organizations to identify

potential collaborations and opportunities. A science night was also hosted, which was a less formal way of talking to the community and fishers about FRMD research activities and the important role that the fishing community has in data collection, science generation, co-production of actual research and fisheries management processes. As part of its ongoing commitment to support the Council and jurisdictional partners in building local agency capacity for developing fishery management plans (FMPs), PIFSC staff member Rob Ahrens conducted a limited stock assessment training in Guam. Participants included staff from the CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), Guam Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources (DAWR), the Council, Micronesia Environmental Services, and ARC Environmental Services. FRMD also worked with DFW and DAWR staffs on improving data collection systems, identifying issues with the current systems, gaps in the technology and developed a prioritized list of actions to address the gaps.

PIFSC held two open science training sessions in Honolulu and Yokohama, Japan that included 11 scientists from the United States, Japan and Taiwan. As a U.S.-promoted initiative under the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-Like Species in the North Pacific, the sessions focused on practical tools like GitHub, containerized computing, script-based modeling and Quarto. These are all tools to improve efficiency, collaboration and reproducibility in stock assessments.

In a collaborative effort to enhance data collection for the International Billfish Biological Sampling (IBBS) program, the PIFSC Life History Program and the NMFS West Coast Regional Observer Program are working together to improve stock assessments for striped marlin, swordfish, and blue marlin by advancing research on their life history information through the IBBS. Samples are collected from the Pacific Ocean, and samples will fill the gap in current sampling needs. As of January 2025, 3,500 billfish samples from across the North Pacific have been collected (1,521 swordfish, 1,468 striped marlin and 496 blue marlin).

## **B. NOAA Office of General Counsel Pacific Islands Section**

Terada provided the GCPI report. *Wille v. Raimondo* filed in March 2022 challenged NMFS's rule prohibiting the approach of Hawaiian spinner dolphins as a violation of the Appointments Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The plaintiffs challenged the rule, not based on the merits of the rule, but based on the contention of it being issued in violation of the Appointment Clause. The district court agreed that ratification of the Approach Rule by the undersecretary of commerce affirmed the validity of the rule and cured any possible defects. Plaintiffs have appealed this ruling. The appellate briefing has been completed and oral arguments are scheduled for May 8, 2025, in Maryland.

*Center for Biological Diversity v. NMFS* challenged NMFS's denial of the petition to issue protective regulations for 20 threatened coral species pursuant to Section 4(d) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The district court issued an order March 6, 2025, on the parties' cross motions for summary judgment. The courts ruled that NMFS is not required by the courts to adopt Section 4(d) regulations to address climate change or for the threatened Caribbean coral localized threats. The agency may have appropriate reasons for declining to do so, but the courts to defer to the agency's reasons, stated that the agency must adequately share those reasons. The court granted both parties' motions in part and denied in part with the matter being remanded to NMFS for further consideration.

## **C. US Coast Guard**



Guanci reported on the USCG District 14 operations. District 14 responded to 1,056 cases that consisted of search and rescue, law enforcement and marine environmental protection response, ports, waterways and coastal security missions.

USCG Cutter *Joseph Gerczak* successfully strengthened strategic regional partnership through engagements with Cook Islands. This deployment included tours of local schools, official meetings, and participation in Operation Taramaea. Cutter *Joseph Gerczak* also patrolled around Swains Island and the Rose Atoll in American Samoa.

USCG Homeland Security Cutter *Midgett* recently deployed in the Western Pacific engaged with partners in Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Zealand and Australia. Cutter *Midgett* patrolled 12,400 nautical miles on the high seas to enhance maritime domain awareness and deter illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and other illicit maritime activity. Port visits included Pago Pago, Funafuti, Lautoka in Fiji, Wellington, Sydney, Port Moresby with official meetings, subject matter exchanges, ship tours and community relations events held.

Guanci highlighted the Port, Waterways and Coastal Security (PWCS) operations, noting Operation Uso Malosi in American Samoa and PWCS surges in Guam and Saipan. Both focused on coastal and waterways security, maritime law enforcement, search and rescue response, and community outreach.

A U.S. Navy asset with embarked USCG Law Enforcement Detachment is conducting high seas boardings and inspections in support of the WCPFC under the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative. Seven boardings in the high seas area including high seas pocket two and four have been conducted so far.

The USCG is also conducting Operation Kohola Guardian, an annual surge operation running through the end of March. Operation focuses on reducing risk to humpback whales and their calves while they spend their time in the Hawaiian Islands.

Guanci highlighted upcoming patrols, noting USCG Cutter *Harriet Lane* being deployed to the Central Pacific from May to June 2025. Several domestic patrols including fast response cutter and seagoing buoy tender patrols in American Samoa are planned to support territorial integrity security patrols, commercial fishing vessel safety inspections and fisheries enforcement boardings.

Sword commended the USCG on its work around American Samoa. When there were pelagic fish around, boaters were not able to go out due to the lack of agents to inspect the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) system. Only one boat was able to depart port, and solutions are needed, such as a waiver that will allow the boaters to utilize the SOLAS equipment that fishing boats in Samoa have which meet the international maritime safety rules.

Guanci thanked Sword for the comments and acknowledged that USCG is working on it, as it has been a long-standing issue in American Samoa. Guanci will report the concerns back to his chain of command and referred further questions on this concern to Richard Mahoney in attendance.

Soliai echoed Sword's concerns in American Samoa and said the government is in search of ways to support the longline fleet due to its verge of extinction. A search for U.S. citizens and U.S. nationals for the commercial fishing industry has been difficult due to the existing

requirement, which would need congressional approval to change. Should an action be decided on by Congress, American Samoa is hoping that USCG will assist. Soliai raised other concerns on the issue of continuity and liaison with locals and local fishers, American Samoa recently found out about the retirement of the USCG liaison officer after 30 years of service (a local individual). American Samoa has lost institutional knowledge and understanding of the culture, and Soliai said it is important to find a USCG liaison that will continue to provide this type of continuity of respect for the culture.

Guthertz thanked the USCG representative and team for their service in and around Guam. She reported Guam is pleased with the federal court's final action on the illegal aliens smuggled into Guam through Saipan who are from China as this has been an ongoing problem for many years. More than 1,000 illegal migrants from Fujian province sailed vessels straight into Guam's waters and were detained and prosecuted. The filings in court were made public, and a few of the cases noted individuals came onto the island of Guam and were allegedly forced by the Guam individual that arranged their travels, to sell meth. Guam looks forward to continuing the collaborative effort with the USCG to intercept these vessels and heightening its awareness of locations to keep the territory protected.

Guanci thanked Guthertz for the comments, and said the concerns will be brought back to Guam. Guanci recalled this being an ongoing issue as a tenure resident of Guam.

Muña recalled a recent conversation with two community defense liaisons in Guam, who work under the Office of the Governor in coordination with Department of Defense (DOD) counterparts. The discussion focused on concerns about the military buildup, the expansion of federal capital improvement laws, and other DOD projects. A continued concern for Guam raised is support in the deployment of FADs. Both community defense liaisons said to bring this up to the USCG. During Guam's previous request, the USCG vessels were undergoing maintenance, so they were not operable. Muña requested an email address or point of contact so that she may reinitiate the conversation about USCG support in the deployment of Guam's FADs.

Guanci said he will follow up with Muña on the Guam point of contact.

Igisomar welcomed Guanci and thanked him for his presentation. Igisomar asked if there was a change in the number of cutters on Guam, and if data are available on the frequency of the patrols up to the Northern Mariana Islands. Igisomar acknowledged the change in command on Guam, and that the previous commander allowed ride-alongs with the Northern Mariana Islands enforcement officers keeping patrols in the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the CNMI. He asked if there is a possibility for that type of partnership.

Guanci said he will pass the request to the new commander of CNMI. Guanci acknowledges that he does not see that partnership dissolving, as the commander was previously in Guam. He said Guam should be receiving one more cutter but is undergoing a process in the USCG yard.

## **D. Enforcement**

### **1. NOAA Office of Law Enforcement**

Martina Sagapolu provided an overview of the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement's (OLE) activities from Dec. 1, 2024, to Feb. 28, 2025. OLE responded to 188 incident cases this quarter, including 66 involving protected species, 96 related to fisheries and 26 relating to sanctuaries. Of the 188 cases, 121 were from Hawai'i, 60 from American Samoa, seven from Guam and none from the CNMI. Six summary settlements were issued for sustainable fishery violations and 10 for marine mammal cases. Minor infractions were cited with one relating to a \$1,000 summary settlement offer issued to the owner/operator of a Hawai'i longline vessel for failing to use the correct seabird mitigation gear, and several \$100 summary settlements issued for the illegal approach of spinner dolphins.

OLE conducted 102 patrols during this period, 90 of which occurred in Hawai'i, one in American Samoa, 11 in Guam and none in the CNMI. These patrols were both land- and sea-based. In a collaborative effort, OLE worked with Guam's coastline by the Guam Customs and Quarantine Agency, USCG boarding officers from California along Guam's coastline. The operation enforced NOAA regulations, USCG safety standards and Guam Customs laws. While on patrol, officers inspected two recreational fishing vessels and one commercial dive vessel. No violations were identified on the recreational fishing vessel, but a USCG violation was found on the commercial dive vessel that was escorted back to Agaña Marina for mooring.

Sagapolu highlighted OLE patrol, monitoring, inspections and outreach efforts such as the joint enforcement operation conducted in American Samoa involving OLE, DMWR, USCG Honolulu District 14, Sector Boarding Team that performed a Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) boarding of three foreign longline fishing vessels. This was all a part of the Uso Malosi operation. OLE continues to conduct 90% of PSMA inspections in American Samoa. Guam Customs and Quarantine collaborated with Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) partners and conducted a container inspection on cargo imported from Seoul, Korea. During an inspection in Guam and CNMI, imported seafood into the territories was also inspected with the help of JEA partners. Under the Seafood Importing Monitoring Program (SIMP), certain species are looked at, and there is a loophole in the program relating to the U.S. territories. Therefore, OLE is working together with the JEA office to ensure the issue is addressed to either deny entry or return seafood back out to port to prevent a loss of revenue to the company, as well as preventing the product from entering U.S. commerce.

Sagapolu highlighted OLE Pacific Islands Division (PID) activities with patterns, such as a land patrol along O'ahu's south and east shores. During this patrol, PID personnel responded to a report of a Hawaiian monk seal resting on rocks at Alan Davis State Park. The seal's location was documented with photos taken and sent to Hawai'i Marine Animal Response.

PID personnel attended a capacity-building training on PSMA for the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in Subic Bay, Philippines aimed to strengthen its capacity to implement PSMA provisions effectively. Due to budget cuts, Sagapolu noted that this will most likely be the last the agency conducts, but providing PSMA training to specific countries that have a lot of issues relating to fisheries and seafood arriving on their islands is important. This effort helps with seafood monitoring and the appropriate addressing of IUU fishing activities within these countries.

Weaver asked what the loophole is with SIMP and whether it is at the territory or federal level.

Sagapolu said it is within the regulations, therefore, it's at the federal level.

Soliai commended and encouraged a peaceful partnership with JEA partners. Some collaborative partnerships with federal agencies are overlooked, and violations of SIMP issues frequently go unnoticed. Soliai recalls that every now and then he attends a local Fish Watch, and he is cc'd on transits in the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa. More patrols will help, as vessels from China are in the area carrying out questionable activities.

Sagapolu said OLE partnership with JEA allows the opportunity to conduct joint patrols alongside USCG assets when in the area, and OLE will request to have the deputized officers accompany OLE, JEA and USCG during these patrols. Sagapolu said it is good to see USCG increasing its presence in American Samoa, as it is surrounded by various foreign countries' EEZs. The key is for fishermen and residents to report suspicious activities, so that OLE can track and conduct inspections of these vessels. She said with a continued strong partnership, IUU activities will be detected and addressed.

Soliai said one of the key concerns in American Samoa is the eastern border, as the inspections need to move up closer to the coast to identify possible IUU activities in the area and the Cook Islands agreement with China is costly for fishing grounds.

Perez asked in relation to the limited budget resources, the fines and penalties seem low and cheap. He said he would like to see something more than the current fines and penalties.

Sword clarified Perez's question and asked whether there is any effort to increase the fines and penalties.

Malloy said she is unaware of any motion on the increase of fines and penalties.

Perez asked how an increase is brought about regarding fines and penalties and requested a response from GCPI.

Melissa Golman, NOAA enforcement attorney for the Pacific Islands Region said the increasing penalties is a regulatory question, and most of the penalty amounts are set by law. There is an in-depth penalty policy NOAA follows to keep penalties consistent across the country and the U.S. territories. Golman said if someone is interested in increasing penalties, it is important for OLE to receive all illegal activity reports to increase the chances that GCPI will find aggravating factors and other things to increase the penalties during prosecution.

Simonds said if members are interested in increasing the penalties, they should first review the policy for the fines and violations and then make a recommendation. It is difficult to request an increase in the penalties without a review of the current policies.

Soliai said the increase of penalties and fines should be in Hawai'i since most of the recent violations are all occurring in Hawai'i waters.

Simonds said a general review is needed.

Weaver asked if a stronger presence is needed in the CNMI since there were zero incidents.

Sagapolu said OLE has less than 10 officers on the ground for the area of responsibility. The OLE office is budget and complaint driven. The Cooperative Enforcement Agreement with the territories and the states is instrumental for OLE to get the mission done. Most complaints

from CNMI residents are related to protected resources. There are very few complaints relating to illegal fishing. Sagapolu said illegal fishing is most likely occurring, but no reports are made. Nine out of 10 times, the complaints received by OLE are three to six months old. No new information is received from CNMI residents.

## **2. NOAA Office of General Counsel Enforcement Section**

Goldman provided a brief report on enforcement cases and activities in the Pacific Islands Region. Goldman, as the new enforcement attorney for NOAA has been coordinating with the enforcement partners that includes development of a training for the USCG high seas boarding and inspection team, developing ways to improve compliance monitoring to fulfill NOAA's obligations to WCPFC and other regional fishery management organizations, and working with OLE on investigations and developing evidence for current cases. The NOAA Office of General Counsel Enforcement Section publishes its charging decisions, settlements and cases that go to hearing on the Section's website. One reported case involved an individual from the Big Island who was charged under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) for an incident that occurred in April 2024. The charges included one count of violating special regulations for Hawai'i spinner dolphins by unlawfully approaching within 50 yards, and another count of assaulting an authorized officer and obstructing the investigation after allegedly confronting a law enforcement officer upon exiting the water. A \$34,500 notice of violation and assessment was issued with the case still open in court.

### **E. US State Department**

There was no report from the U.S. State Department.

### **F. US Fish and Wildlife Service/Department of the Interior**

Peck provided the USFWS report. The Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument has now been renamed to the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument. As previously reported, the USFWS issued a special use permit of the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument to allow a Japanese research vessel to conduct research on the spatial and vertical distribution of skipjack, bigeye, yellowfin, the larvae and juveniles that occur around Howland and Baker Islands.

Peck echoed Malloy's report on MTMAC and its Guam seat with current nominated representatives provided in the written report. The MTMAC is coordinating with E/V *Nautilus* on upcoming deep-sea research in the region.

### **G. Public Comment**

Nate Ilaoa, a restaurant owner from American Samoa and vice chair of the Council's Advisory Panel (AP), commented and echoed Sword and Soliai's comments and agreed that American Samoa needs a USCG cutter home ported in the region. Ilaoa expressed his disappointment in USCG's response letter to the Council regarding the master certification requirement, as it only disclosed a web link to become citizens without any other guidance or further invitation to discuss the problem with the local government or the Council. He acknowledged the regulatory constraints, but said the fishery is in dire straits and there is a need to explore possible avenues to address these concerns. Ilaoa also commented on OLE's actions to close the loophole and expressed his appreciation for Sagapolu's report on the issue, which has

been raised repeatedly over the past four to five Council meetings by the American Samoa AP, concerning bycatch flooding local markets from foreign longline vessels.

## **H. Council Discussion and Action**

Simonds referred to Soliai's comments regarding the American Samoa fleet and said these issues have been ongoing for that fishery for years, and that Soliai suggested looking at the disaster relief section in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). There are three parts to the disaster relief provision. MSA states that a governor can write to the secretary of commerce using one or more of the explanations such as fishing failure and undetermined causes. Simonds said this topic warrants discussion and asked Soliai to elaborate. Simonds asked the American Samoa Council members if the fishery wants to fish in the surrounding EEZ, as American Samoa is approximately 16 miles away from Samoa. If so, the U.S. government will have to speak with those island areas at the request of the American Samoa governor. The purse seine treaty with the U.S. government provides access for the purse seiners to fish in 16 island nations and is currently progressing through the House of Representatives in Congress.

Soliai said the issue of the longliners in American Samoa has been ongoing for almost 10 years. As a former DMWR director for American Samoa, and now executive advisor for Natural Resources of American Samoa, he noted the issue has worsened over the years. Concerns from the local longline owners include continued decline of catch per unit effort (CPUE) and increasing operating costs coupled with low fish prices. The surrounding areas are distant water fishing nations camped right outside of the EEZ around American Samoa. After careful consideration, he said the disaster evaluation process under the MSA is worth discussing. He emphasized the need for a conversation with the new administration and government officials in American Samoa. Soliai hopes the disaster relief process will start soon and is aware of the initiative the American Samoa governor would need to conduct and submit in a request. The issue that lies with fishing in other EEZs is the challenge longliners face with fishing exclusively within the American Samoa EEZ. Despite this challenge, Soliai thinks it should be explored, particularly with respect to access and fee determination. Soliai echoed Simonds' statement on the tuna treaty and said this can be made a part of this option. Any support for the American Samoa longliners is welcomed.

Muña said the approach made by the American Samoa Council members is insightful and Guam will provide support in any way for these efforts.

Sword said in his involvement in the fisheries over the past 20 years, many longliners have become friends who are now in greater dire straits than they have ever been in the past. Longliners continue to face challenges such as securing qualified masters and obtaining SOLAS-compliant equipment, and he hopes a solution will be found soon. Other undermined factors include two foreign fleets spotted in the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa, near Manu'a. These fleets have been seen crossing through the area and spending eight hours in one spot, and no action is taken. The territory does not want to give away the fish to Chinese vessels that turn around and sell it back to American Samoa. American Samoa lacks the resources to investigate these fleets, especially since the vessels are fully operational and not in distress. New FADs have been discovered in the areas where these fleets were sighted. Reports indicate that these fleets deploy individuals upstream to release around 100 FADs downstream. Sword hopes a solution is found for these issues.

Simonds said these issues must be addressed with the specific contact in that section, and work with the U.S. government. She said this is a great opportunity for the federal government to help American Samoa as bilaterals with surrounding countries can be formed.

*Regarding USCG, the Council:*

- 1. Requested USCG to meet with the fishing industry, local leaders, and other community members in American Samoa to resolve the ongoing issues (e.g., life rafts, captain licensing, lack of assets, etc.) in the territory.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Weaver.

Motion passed.

*Regarding NOAA OLE, the Council:*

- 2. Directed staff to work with Council members to conduct a review of the current OLE fines and penalty schedule to develop potential recommendations on changes needed for the region.**

Soliai asked if this is the work that the Council members are being asked to work on with OLE, and whether fines collected within each region remain within each region.

Sagapolu said fines are assessed for administrative costs and the remainder goes to that region.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

*Regarding disaster relief, the Council:*

- 3. Directed staff to work with the American Samoa territorial government to request financial relief under MSA Section 312(a) due to (A) natural causes; (B) man-made causes beyond the Council's control due to expanding international high seas competition and (C) undetermined other causes.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

## **VI. Pelagics and International**

### **A. Status Report on the Regulatory Implementation Approach for the Hawai'i and American Samoa Longline Crew Training**

Lynn Rassel and Jason Mehlinger, PIRO SFD, provided an update on the development of the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement. The Council at its 201st meeting took initial action on the regulatory amendment to implement a crew training requirement, which would fulfill a terms and condition (T&C) of recent biological opinions (BiOps) for the fisheries, and scheduled final action for the June 2025 meeting. The Council directed the Action Team to refine the approach for regulatory implementation in advance of final action and provide an update at the March meeting. The Council additionally requested NMFS to make the crew training program accessible to fishery participants and work with the Council and Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fishery representatives to explore an appointment scheduling system that would facilitate greater participation in the training sessions.

Following the 201st Council meeting, the Action Team met to review the regulatory approach. The Action Team focused on a two-component approach involving 1) crew certification, requiring at least one certified crew member per vessel with the certificate onboard, and 2) a person-on-deck requirement, with a preference for one trained person immediately available to direct and oversee protected species handling. This approach would provide a clear enforcement mechanism and align with the intent of the T&C. 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 T&C would require longline vessels to carry at least two trained persons with approved training, with at least one trained person on deck when an ESA-listed species interaction occurs during gear retrieval. PIRO provided the draft revision to the Council for review at the end of February 2025 and requested comments by March 28, 2025.

To date, the pilot program has trained 618 individual crew members from 120 vessels in the Hawai'i longline fleet, and 51 individual crew members from nine vessels in the American Samoa longline (ASLL) fleet. Challenges such as declining new vessel attendance, changes in crew transportation, and reduced funding for translation services necessitate a new training access plan. In transitioning from the pilot training to a permanent program in May 2025, PIRO plans to shift to an in-person video-based training with a short comprehension quiz, utilizing the existing protected species workshop animated handling and release guideline video with interpreted audio tracks and translated closed captions. This new training plan will allow PIRO to offer a regular training program with less resources and cost, which will then allow for flexible scheduling for individual vessels. Additionally, PIRO would be able to coordinate with any vessel planning to fish after returning from a crew pickup trip, allowing the captain to administer the video training upon picking up the crew, followed by a check-in with PIRO staff upon arrival in Honolulu.

The Action Team plans to finalize the regulatory implementation approach based on the revised T&C and Council input, and will prepare supporting analysis for the draft regulatory amendment in preparation for Council final action in June.

Soliai asked if the remaining vessels to be trained are Honolulu-based, and whether the training for Pago Pago-based vessels has been completed. Soliai also asked how frequently the training will be offered, noting the volatility in the industry in terms of crew turnover.

Mehlinger confirmed the remaining vessels are Honolulu-based or primarily operating out of California ports. If the California-based vessels do not come into the Honolulu port in the next couple of months, they will likely be the first recipients of the virtual training. The American Samoa-based vessels receive the existing protected species workshop training for the entire vessel, thus providing easy coverage for training. Mehlinger said the new short-form training is expected to run at least once a week, noting the need to offer the training regularly as he has seen regular crew turnover during the pilot training program period.

Simonds referred members to a draft letter providing comments in response to the crew training T&C revision, noting that staff believe that there should be contingencies built into the T&C language to prevent unnecessary burden on fishery participants. She requested the Council to consider endorsing the recommendation contained in the draft letter.

## **B. Revisions to the Longline Biological Opinions Terms and Conditions**



Rassel presented on the proposed revision to the 2023 BiOp incidental take statement (ITS) and reasonable and prudent measures T&C for the MHI insular false killer whales. PIRO provided the draft revision to the Council with a request to respond with any comments by March 28, 2025. The ESA-listed MHI insular false killer whale occurs mostly within the MHI longline exclusion zone and overlaps with the Hawai‘i longline fishery in a small triangular area. There have been no observed interactions inside the overlap area to date.

The original T&C required NMFS, within one year, to determine the minimum level of observer coverage reliable for estimating MHI insular false killer whale interactions with the Hawai‘i deep-set longline fishery, and to provide observer coverage at the level determined reliable if current levels are below that level. The proposed revision would require NMFS to report the number of sets and the five-year running sum of sets within the insular false killer whale overlap area each year. The revision was based on an analysis conducted by the BiOp Reasonable and Prudent Measures Implementation Working Group, which presented its findings at the 199th Council meeting in June 2024. The analysis found that given how rare false killer whale captures are and the relatively low effort in the overlap area, reliable observer coverage level exceeding 90% would be necessary for adequate monitoring, which is not currently feasible. Currently, the MHI insular false killer whale interaction estimates inside the overlap area are calculated annually based on fishing effort and estimated density of each of the false killer whale stocks in that area.

The original ITS, which if exceeded would reinitiate ESA Section 7 consultation, was 0.427 animals or one observed over five consecutive years in the overlap area. The proposed revised ITS is 328 sets over five years in the overlap area. PIRO plans to use the number of fishing sets in the overlap area based on logbook data as a proxy for monitoring the MHI insular false killer whale captures. The fishery has not exceeded the level of effort in the proposed ITS in recent years.

### **C. North Pacific Striped Marlin Catch Limit (Final Action)**

Mark Fitchett, Council staff, presented the catch limits for the Western and Central North Pacific Ocean (WCNPO) striped marlin for the Council’s consideration of final action. NMFS withdrew the proposed rule that was based on the December 2022 Council action to address domestic overfishing pursuant to MSA Section 304(i). The Council may set catch limits for this stock pursuant to MSA 303(a)(1)(a), where the Council may recommend a management measure to ensure the long-term viability of the fishery, and to address any foreign matters in preventing overfishing. The WCNPO striped marlin stock is no longer subject to being overfished under the Pacific Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), which eliminated the obligation under MSA 304(i). However, the stock is still experiencing overfishing and also experiencing overfishing by the WCPFC standard, and the rebuilding plan under the WCPFC to meet a target biomass of 20% unfished by 2034 remains in place.

U.S. catches have historically been relatively small in comparison to foreign fisheries. Japan has historically caught up to 10,000 metric tons (mt) of striped marlin, which is the majority of the historical total catch. Catches declined following the prohibition of high seas drift gillnet fisheries in the mid-1990s. The U.S. historical catches relative to total catch since the mid-1970s was approximately 3%, but has been between 12-15% in recent years.

Stock projections were used to determine target catches in the WCPFC rebuilding plan. Target total catch is approximately 2,400 mt. Catches were apportioned to develop a new

WCPFC measure on the stock, conservation and management measure (CMM) 2024-06. Under the measure, Japan has a limit of about 1,450 mt, which is not fully utilized. Chinese Taipei has a limit of about 360 mt, and Korea has a limit of about 215 mt, but their reported catches do not reach those levels. The U.S. catch limit under the measure is 228.4 mt, plus an additional limit of up to 165 mt in the footnote of CMM 2024-06 that could be presumed to be for the United States, increasing the U.S. catch limit to 393.4 mt.

The purpose and need for Council action are to prevent overfishing under MSA 303(a)(1)(A), align with the new international limits established under CMM 2024-06, and reduce unnecessary burdens on the fishery—particularly considering that the Hawai‘i longline fishery, as the principal U.S. fishery, has historically had a lower impact on the stock. The Council action under consideration is to specify catch limits for 2025-2027, consistent with CMM 2024-06. The Council may also recommend a process for revisiting the catch limits, as well as an accountability measure (AM) in the form of a longline retention limit of approximately 97% of total U.S. catch. Once that level is reached, the longline fishery would be required to cease retention of striped marlin. The affected vessels would be U.S. longline vessels operating under a valid Hawai‘i limited-entry permit and that fish within the WCPFC region, but north of the equator.

Four alternatives were presented for Council’s consideration: alternative 1-no action or status quo, which would not set a retention limit for WCNPO striped marlin; alternative 2-set a catch limit of 457 mt and a longline retention limit of 443 mt for 2025-2027, consistent with the Council’s previous action at its 193rd meeting and CMM 2010-01; alternative 3, which was the preliminary preferred alternative from the December 2024 initial action to set a catch limit of 393.4 mt and a longline retention limit of 381.5 mt for 2025–2027, subject to reduction based on the United States and total international catch of WCNPO striped marlin, consistent with CMM 2024-06; and alternative 4-prohibit retention of WCNPO striped marlin (a retention limit of 0 mt) for 2025–2027. Alternatives 1 and 2 would be inconsistent with international management and alternative 4 would preclude the United States from retaining striped marlin.

Based on historical catches, the probability of exceeding the limit during the calendar year in alternative 3 is around 15-16%, whereas the probability is approximately 5-6% in any given year for alternative 2. The prices of striped marlin are highly variable, with prices being lower in the middle of the summer as well as at the end of the calendar year. Council considerations should also include the historical use of circle hooks, prohibition of wire leaders, and existing spatial closures that collectively lead to potential conservation of the stock.

Weaver said that in CNMI tournaments and derbies, catches of striped marlin are recorded as marlin and not identified down to the species due to having a lot of new fishers. Weaver asked how the identification of correct species can be captured within the Council’s recommendation.

Fitchett said that striped marlin are not as common around the CNMI but there could be a level of catch that is not accounted for in that area, and reporting of striped marlin in nonlongline fisheries could be improved. However, the level of striped marlin catch is assumed to be very low. The Fishery Data Collection and Research Committee (FDCRC) will look into this issue.

Simonds said the CNMI government should change its reporting to include different species of marlin and also have training on species identification.

Soliai said the Council should consider alternative 3 based on the new CMM.

Simonds said the new striped marlin amendment the Council is voting on is complicated now because of a WCPFC measure that the head negotiator pushed for, against previously agreed positions of the U.S. delegation. The new CMM fails to minimize any disadvantage to U.S. fishermen in relation to other members of the commission and failed to maximize the opportunities for fishing vessels of the United States to harvest fish on the high seas of the convention area. The Council wrote a letter to the previous secretary of commerce on the matter but did not get a response. She hopes the new administration will appoint a new negotiator who will support U.S. Pacific fisheries.

#### **D. Electronic Monitoring Program**

##### **1. Update on Electronic Monitoring Amendment Development**

Fitchett presented on the status of developing a proposal for the Pelagic FEP to implement EM in longline fisheries.

At its December 2024 meeting, the Council took initial action by directing the Action Team to develop an amendment to authorize the use of electronic monitoring in pelagic longline fisheries. The goal is to enable reliable estimation of protected species interactions. The program would be phased in as optional through 2027, until permanent resources become available to support a mandatory program. Since that recommendation, several changes have occurred. These include a growing urgency to act due to the uncertain future of the human observer program, and the availability of NMFS funding to support implementation from 2025 to 2027.

The Action Team is developing a proposed amendment for final action the Council's June 2025 meeting. It builds on the Council's recommendations and defines the scope of electronic monitoring use, with the primary objective of providing reliable estimates of protected species interactions in the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries. The Council also requested that NMFS, Council staff and advisory groups work to establish regional standards for NMFS-approved EM systems. This includes developing a checklist, outlining tasks and timelines for implementing a fully mandatory program, and drafting key elements for vessel monitoring plans (VMPs). VMPs would be specific to each vessel. They would define camera placement and configuration, as well as the roles of the Council, PIFSC, PIRO, and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC). They would also clarify the responsibilities of vessel operators in maintaining the onboard equipment. Each vessel would need to follow its VMP, ensure compliance, and maintain a functioning EM system with minimal burden to fishing operations. Plans should also aim to reduce the potential for issues while at sea. The Council further requested that NMFS and Council staff engage with Hawai'i and American Samoa longline vessel owners and operators. Outreach should include information on the impacts of the action and how it may affect ongoing operations.

Soliai asked if there has been any engagement with longline owners.

Fitchett said that an "EM 101" will be commencing, with more details provided in the next presentation. The Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) has had conversations informally and through the Council advisory groups on how EM could be implemented with minimal issue. A longline representative on the Hawai'i AP also weighed in at the last meeting. For American

Samoa, the AP and others have noted the difficulty in implementing EM and how important outreach is with the fleet. American Samoa outreach is likely to begin in 2026.

Soliai said there should be more consultation before final action is taken, particularly for American Samoa.

Fitchett indicated the timeline provided has American Samoa outreach in 2026 and implementation in 2027.

Soliai said it is important that the vessel owners and operators are engaged so they are aware that this action is taking place.

## **2. Status of Hawai‘i and American Samoa Longline Observer Program**

Jarad Makaiau, PIRO SFD, presented the status of the human observer program and plans for implementing EM. He highlighted the urgency of providing monitoring for the longline fisheries to comply with certain laws such as the ESA and MMPA, as well as international obligations. He acknowledged that the current plan is not the ideal way to roll out a new enterprise. PIRO had endeavored to fully explore EM in the region’s longline fisheries under a pilot project, but there is a need to expedite development because the observer program is on the verge of insolvency. The observer program provides the fisheries with certain coverage and exemptions from take prohibitions under applicable laws. PIRO is unable to conduct its usual due diligence as it would during a standard enterprise rollout and, as a result, may not be engaged with the American Samoa fishery for an extended period.

For more than 20 years, PIRO has deployed observers on longline fisheries—covering 100% of shallow-set longline trips and 20% of Hawai‘i deep-set and American Samoa longline trips—to collect accurate data on protected species interactions. The coverage rate was reduced starting in 2023 due to inadequate funding to cover increasing costs. Reductions have been focused on the Hawai‘i deep-set longline fishery because it accounts for more than 80% of observer costs. Funding allocation for 2025 only allows PIRO to cover 7% of Hawai‘i deep-set longline fishery trips. PIRO plans to maintain the Hawai‘i shallow-set coverage at 100% in the near future because it requires at-sea near-time reporting for sea turtle interaction limits. For 2026 and beyond, the amount available to cover observer costs is unknown, especially given the federal scrutiny of government efficiency and funding. Therefore, there is an immediate pivot to EM to satisfy reporting and monitoring requirements in a cost-efficient manner.

Published reports demonstrated that EM can accurately detect fish and bycatch. It can collect information to help inform serious injury and mortality determinations needed with respect to protected species impact analyses. This comes with an understanding that EM cameras cannot do several things that human observers can do, like collecting biological samples. EM technologies are expected to improve over time.

NMFS has established a cooperative partnership with PSMFC, which has a history of helping other regions develop EM enterprises for data collection, storage, review and analysis, consistent with applicable confidentiality laws and policies. PSMFC will be a one-stop shop to provide technical support to fishing vessels, placing cameras onboard, retrieving hard drives and replacing cameras. PIRO is working to increase the number of vessels voluntarily carrying EM systems, while the Council continues developing and authorizing EM use in longline fisheries.

Engagement with the fleets will begin in Hawai‘i in 2025, where 20 vessels are already voluntarily using EM systems. PIRO is working with HLA to present EM to the fleet. The goal is to restore coverage to historical levels and review at least 20% of all deep-set longline trips using EM. PIRO strives to maintain 100% monitoring of all shallow-set longline trips, and overall coverage rates could increase as funding allows. There is a lot of ongoing discussion about whether monitoring needs and existing management measures may need to change, but the urgency at this time is to get cameras onboard.

PIRO managed to secure approximately \$4 million to support an EM enterprise. Currently, it costs \$6 million to place 7% of observers on longline trips, whereas in the past the same amount of funding would have provided close to 20% coverage. In contrast, an EM program with coverage rates of at least 20% in the deep-set fisheries and 100% in the shallow-set fisheries would cost around \$2.4 million—representing substantial savings compared to the cost of achieving the same coverage historically using observers.

In March 2025, PSMFC hired an EM project coordinator who is a former Hawai‘i longline observer and has been involved with PIFSC’s pilot project. Between April and August, PIRO and PIFSC plan to engage with the Hawai‘i longline fleet to explain how EM will work, its impact on observer coverage, associated cost and benefits, and whether industry will be responsible for funding the program. The goal is to begin deploying cameras on a voluntary basis as early as fall 2025, using available funds, if regulations for a mandatory program are not yet in place. In 2026, a second batch of 50 cameras will be deployed and initial engagement will be conducted with the American Samoa fleet. Data review will also begin in 2026. The final batch of 50 cameras will be deployed in 2027 and data review will continue. The goal is for all longline vessels in the Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fleets to have cameras onboard by the end of 2027. Beginning in 2028, cameras will need to be replaced every three years, and cost allocation will be covered in the next presentation.

Sword expressed relief that funding exists to implement EM in the immediate future. Sword asked whether the camera rollout for American Samoa will also be staggered.

Makaiau said there are only 10 vessels in American Samoa, so the implementation itself is expected to be easier than the Hawai‘i fleet.

Sword asked if vessel owners would have access to the EM footage in real time to monitor the crew.

Makaiau said there is a live feed to the bridge but that the video is recorded and not transmitted through satellite.

Sword asked if American Samoa longliners have been engaged.

Makaiau said the agency has not engaged with any owners or operators in American Samoa.

Sword said there is a need to find ways to keep the ASLL fleet alive before engaging with them (on the EM rollout).

Soliai asked if there has been any resistance from boats.

Makaiau said PIRO has had positive participation so far.

Ramsey asked what happens to the vessel if technology fails.

Makaiau said there will be ways to waive requirements as is currently done for human observers at the discretion of the regional administrator, noting that NMFS would not want to hold vessels back for something they cannot provide.

Soliai asked if this would be a justification for the continued use of logbooks.

Makaiau said in the case of electronic logbooks, if the tablet is inoperable, operators are allowed to use paper logbooks. In the case of EM, there may not be a simple monitoring substitution, so a waiver would most likely be the way to address a failed system.

Soliai reiterated the need for outreach and to reduce cost burden to the ASLL fleet and vessel owners, noting that this may sound like it is being shoved down their throats without any engagement with them. Soliai also noted the impacts of EOs on deregulation may have an impact on the needs for EM.

Makaiau acknowledged the unprecedented challenges with funding and changes to the regulatory system. Over time, the federal government has imposed numerous regulations on the Pacific fishing industry, and NMFS has provided the tools and mechanisms to support compliance. The current situation is that the regulations and requirements still exist, but NMFS does not have the funding to assist the fishery participants with compliance. That makes everyone vulnerable if the requirements cannot be met, hence the urgency to get EM in place before the observer program becomes fully insolvent.

Simonds said there are several regulations in place due to other applicable laws, including those with the ESA, that warrant review.

### **3. Electronic Monitoring Sampling Strategy and Planning**

Ahrens, PIFSC, presented on the transition from the observer to EM program, focusing on sampling design. The objectives of the current observer sampling program was to develop a probability-based design that provides the greatest average efficiency for estimating interactions with species of highest concern. The current observer sampling design at its core had a systematic random sample, which historically was 15% of the trips, and an additional 5% “plus group” that provided the program with flexibility to deploy observers when they were available. With EM, there would not be a “plus group” and the sampling of EM footage could be a systematic random sample among all available data. How much to sample will be a challenging question. There has been discussion of maintaining a target 20% of trips with EM to be consistent with observer coverage historically, but the sampling rate will depend on the accuracy needed for a given obligation. Ahrens provided the similarities and differences of using EM data versus human observer data. Ahrens also explained how both data streams will be used to provide two combined estimates for bycatch and rare events while both data streams are available and as human observers are phased out.

Simonds asked if EM data has been paired with electronic reporting (ER) provided by the fishermen.

Ahrens said the agency has not looked at using EM to validate ER reports yet.

#### **4. Socioeconomic Impact Analysis**

David O'Brien, PIRO SFD, presented on NMFS's cost allocation policies and anticipated EM costs. Under NMFS's Policy Procedure 04-115-02, which outlines cost allocation for electronic technologies, data collection will not be approved if funding is unavailable or the cost is deemed unsustainable. For all EM program scenarios, NMFS would be responsible for administrative costs. These include setting program standards, monitoring performance, and providing support for science, enforcement and management needs—except where the MSA specifically authorizes the collection of fees to cover these expenses. If the Council takes action to initiate an EM program, industry will be responsible for the sampling costs, unless NMFS determines that EM is necessary and appropriate to meet legal obligations (e.g., requirements of the ESA), and sufficient appropriated funds are available. If there are insufficient funds, NMFS cannot guarantee the availability of appropriated funds for EM program administrative costs and may adjust or end an existing program.

The Pacific Islands Electronic Technologies Implementation Plan (ETIP) for 2021 to 2025 provides detailed cost estimation for reviewing percentages of EM footage at varying sampling rates, administrative costs, hardware costs and data storage costs. The ETIP estimated an operational EM budget, including data review of 25% of all longline sets, and camera replacement every three years, would cost just over \$2.45 million per year. This includes approximately \$1.93 million in sampling costs and more than \$500,000 annually in administrative costs. NMFS is proposing, for Council consideration, that industry contribute to the cost of the future EM program after the initial three years. NMFS does not envision industry covering the sampling costs, but is proposing, as a starting point for discussion, that industry cover replacement costs of EM systems. The cost to replace EM for 160 vessels in Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries is \$1.6 million, at \$10,000 per vessel every three years. NMFS is open to other ideas for cost-sharing given the uncertainty in funding.

Ramsey asked if the upfront cost, which may be steeper and then taper down, is considered in future costs.

O'Brien said the project plan has \$4 million up front that should cover the initial higher costs in setting up the program, with \$10,000 replacement every three years expected moving forward.

Soliai asked if the \$10,000 is every three years per vessel, so the cost on an annual basis would be one third.

O'Brien confirmed and said those installed in 2025 would be replaced for \$10,000 in 2028.

Soliai asked if NMFS is willing to a cost-share with the industry on the three-year interval.

O'Brien said he could not answer that but the proposal for replacement coverage by industry was intended to prompt Council discussion.

Simonds asked who pays if the system breaks prematurely.

O'Brien said this is an issue NMFS would need to work out and may need to be factored in the regulations.

Simonds said this is for monitoring protected species and suggested that the EM funding be augmented with NMFS's programmatic funding for those species.

Malloy asked if Simonds was referring to money that is devoted to other ESA statutory support.

Simonds said yes.

Malloy said there is prioritization among programs and NMFS must spend money to address a range of statutory requirements. PIRO has never received enough money to support existing programs. She was uncertain whether the new administration will redirect funding from other priorities to EM, but diverting ESA and other protected species program funds toward the observer program was never a priority in the past.

Simonds said she was referring to NMFS headquarters providing funds to PIRO, noting that her complaint has been the lack of competitiveness of PIRO and PIFSC in securing adequate funding. She added that the Council helped PIFSC obtain \$1.2 million for a pelagic program, but some of those funds were directed to the Southwest Fisheries Center, a decision the Council opposed. She said the Council will direct its request to NMFS headquarters, noting she did not think the industry should pay for monitoring. Simonds reiterated that the Council's policy has been that federal agencies should cover the cost of monitoring programs because that is the government's job.

Soliai asked what the total cost of the initial EM setup is per vessel.

O'Brien did not have that information. It would be allocated from the \$4 million to start the program.

Malloy said \$4 million is more than the expected cost in establishing the systems on the vessels and includes establishing the entire back end of the infrastructure to review the video, train people to review the video, have them record their observations and then transfer those observations. That \$4 million is just the entire upfront setup cost of the entire program, separate from the \$10,000 per vessel replacement cost. Malloy said there will also be a need to refurbish infrastructure over time including data servers and associated projects, which NMFS is not asking the industry to cover.

Makaiau said the associated costs are itemized in the ETIP document that O'Brien discussed in his presentation. A significant portion of the sampling costs is the staffing and contracting time for data review, which NMFS is proposing to absorb. The cost that the fleet would cover is the cost of the system replacement, and any time it was in port while the technicians are onboard to replace the systems.

Justin Hospital, PIFSC Social, Ecological, and Economics Program, provided an overview of the economic performance of the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries. This information can be used to analyze economic issues related to the implementation of EM. Among U.S. ports, Honolulu ranked sixth with nearly \$113 million in fishery revenue, and Pago Pago, American Samoa ranked seventh with revenues of just over \$97 million. In terms of volume, Pago Pago ranked eighth in the nation with more than 118 million pounds landed. Honolulu ranked 25th in the country with almost 17 million pounds landed, clearly demonstrating the high-quality, high-value nature of the Hawai'i longline fishery product.



Hawai‘i’s commercial fishing and seafood industry supported more than 10,000 full and part-time jobs and generated almost \$824 million in sales. Hawai‘i’s noncommercial fishing activity in the State of Hawai‘i supported an additional 2,000 jobs and nearly \$379 million in sales.

In 2023, the Hawai‘i longline fishery generated approximately \$107 million in revenue from 22.5 million pounds landed in Hawai‘i. The average annual revenue per vessel was approximately \$745,000, or 9% below the average of the previous 19 years. The ASLL fishery reported approximately \$2.82 million in revenue in 2023, a decline of 89% from the peak of approximately \$25 million in 2007. The average revenue per vessel in American Samoa was approximately \$282,000, with 10 active vessels. Surveys for the two longline fisheries to discern costs and earnings began in 2004 and 2006. These surveys collect key components of variable trip costs, such as fuel, bait, oil, ice, gear, provisions, communications and light sticks for the shallow-set fishing, as well as some captain and crew information, such as the number of national and foreign crew members.

In Hawai‘i, average trip costs for the deep-set fishery increased slightly over time, while those for the shallow-set fishery declined slightly. In 2023, the average deep-set trip cost was \$33,546. Average trip-level revenue for trips with cost data was approximately \$69,000, resulting in average net revenue of \$35,753 per trip. This represented a 15% decrease from 2022 and a decline of nearly 45% from the peak in 2016. The average shallow-set trip cost was just under \$50,000, with average trip-level revenue of approximately \$107,000. This resulted in net revenue of slightly more than \$57,000 per trip, down 54% from the peak in 2022. For the cost-earning study conducted in 2023, PIFSC received 60 completed surveys—a 43% response rate for the Hawai‘i longline fishery. Based on the survey, the average annual gross revenue per vessel in 2022 was approximately \$808,000. For each dollar earned, \$0.29 went to fuel, \$0.26 went to other variable trip costs, 22% to labor, 9% to fixed costs and 9% to sales costs, resulting in a profit margin of 5%. In 2022, 62% of survey respondents reported a profit, while 38% reported a loss. Adjusted for inflation, average profit per vessel in 2022 was the lowest on record.

In the ASLL fishery, recent trip costs averaged just over \$45,000. In 2023, the average cost per set was \$1,719, with average revenue per set at \$2,778, resulting in net revenue of approximately \$1,059 per set. This was a 24% decrease from 2022 and nearly 60% lower than the 2007 peak. Comparing 2023 fishing activity to 2016, the year of the last survey, revenues declined by 53% and effort dropped by approximately 45%. While CPUE has increased, the market price for fish sold from American Samoa has fallen. The average cost per set was 42% higher in 2023 than in 2016, and net revenue was 25% lower, indicating a pessimistic outlook for the fishery due to narrowing profit margins.

Sword asked why the valuation of American Samoa was lumped with the other territories.

Hospital said for simplicity they were grouped, with the vast majority of those benefits attributed to American Samoa (95%). Of those jobs, approximately 3,200 are in American Samoa.

Sword said this was disconcerting because American Samoa has its own distinct major fisheries and a comparable longline fishery. He stated it demeans the value of American Samoa by aggregating with the other territories.

Hospital appreciated the feedback and noted the annual Fisheries of the United States national report has a separate territorial spotlight.

Soliai noted that in 2019, American Samoa was separated in that report. He has asked Sam Rauch since then to rectify this so that the territories are separate. Hawai‘i is separate and American Samoa should also be separate.

Simonds thanked Hospital for the presentation that is timely and shows the value of the fisheries.

Guthertz said the lack of separation of American Samoa was saddening and once again territories are marginalized in the national report. The American-flagged territory needs should be addressed like any state. The people there work very hard to make a living, just as hard as anyone else in the country. They deserve recognition and the continued opportunity to fish as they always have. American Samoa fishermen have suffered and the national reports need to convey this.

Soliai asked if there is another report that will be released soon that may show those details or breakdown of the figures provided in Hospital’s report.

Hospital said the Chan 2023 report referenced in his presentation is the American Samoa economic contribution report, which informs the national report. The Chan 2024 report has economic contributions for Guam and the CNMI. There will be a spotlight topic in the 2023 report (coming soon) that has the economic, social and cultural benefits of fisheries for each of the U.S. Pacific Island Territories. This is a different report from the Fisheries of the United States national report.

Soliai said he is glad there is an addition to include the Pacific Island Territories in the national report. Soliai asked if the reports capture fish prices through all these studies.

Hospital said there is fish price information, including cannery prices. Hospital noted the fish price information for Hawai‘i is much easier to access.

## **5. Electronic Monitoring Discussion on Critical Decision Points**

Fitchett provided an overview of the Council decision points for EM implementation. The purpose of the action is to implement a monitoring tool to fulfill objectives that meet statutory requirements. EM could be incorporated primarily for statistically robust and reliable estimates of protected species interactions, discards and bycatch under the ESA and MMPA mandates, as well as inclusion in the FEP as a Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology. Reporting reliable estimates of all catch is also a requirement under the MSA as well as regional fishery management organizations minimum standards. The need for the action is to address the declining human observer coverage and provide monitoring alternatives to ensure compliance, as well as provide a cost-effective monitoring tool that minimizes costs to the agency and the fishers. Another need is to prevent interruptions to the longline operations to ensure compliance with statutory requirements.

Fitchett described preliminary alternatives to implement EM through a final action in June 2025. The first alternative is no action, under which the longline fisheries would continue operating at the status quo—though it is unlikely the observer program would maintain current coverage levels. The second alternative is to phase-in a mandatory EM program, and then a third

is an alternative to implement an optional EM program. Subalternatives for implementing a mandatory program include randomly assigning vessels over the three-year period, prioritizing vessels in the shallow-set sector (or any other defined group), or prioritizing vessels that are voluntarily participating in EM. Under the last subalternative, once the prioritized vessels are equipped with EM systems, the remaining vessels would be randomly selected each year to reach 50 vessels with systems installed and operational. This approach aligns with NMFS's plan to phase in EM using the agency's available funding. A mandatory program under alternative 2 (and its subalternatives) would help ensure 100% implementation of EM in American Samoa and Hawai'i longline fisheries. Prioritization for phase in of vessels has several benefits and limitations in the 2025-2027 period, while a random assignment reduces biases and ensures equitability. Under an optional EM program, participation could vary widely and may leave nonparticipating vessels vulnerable to noncompliance and potential disruptions if statutory monitoring requirements are not met. The Council was asked to provide feedback on the preliminary alternatives and other information needs in advance of final action.

Weaver said EM creates a hardship for American Samoa, and there should be federal support for maintenance, similar to the warranty on a new car. He wondered what would happen if the system goes down before the three-year mark and whether the vessels would have to shoulder the cost at that time.

Soliai agreed that there are hardships the longline fisheries are facing, as demonstrated by Hospital's report showing poor economic performance.

## **E. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

### **1. Advisory Panels**

Ilaoa, AP American Samoa vice chair, presented the meeting report and recommendations.

*Regarding EM*, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council consider the following in further developing the EM action:

- Maintaining cost responsibility for implementation of EM on the agency and not 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.

Ilaoa reported the American Samoa AP felt strongly that any further economic burden needs to be avoided for the longline fleet and that there is more at stake for American Samoa. The AP understands the importance of observers and EM, but the fleet is operating at or near a loss. The fleet helps bring in fishery development funds and gives American Samoa a seat at management bodies like this Council and the WCPFC. It is no exaggeration to say they could be facing a total economic collapse in American Samoa. Deregulation and reducing burdens need to be a priority.

Gil Kualii, AP Hawai'i vice chair, presented the meeting report and recommendations. One of the Hawai'i AP members is part of HLA and led the conversation on EM stating that the Hawai'i longline fleet prefers EM over human observer coverage. In the United States, fisheries are the only sector that the government does not subsidize. If EM becomes a gold standard, then

this could be the overall win with funding for observers decreasing. The fleet does not consider EM as a burden, but asks that if the rules for authorizing EM would be an acceptable substitute for onboard observer coverage. The Hawai‘i AP does not think the fishers should be covering the cost of EM.

*Regarding the updates on the Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement*, the Hawai‘i AP supports the revised regulatory implementation approach as well as the video-based training, noting the increased flexibility and accessibility for complying with the regulatory requirements. The AP acknowledges that the revised approach addresses previously identified concerns and recommendations.

## **2. Joint Plan Team**

There were no Plan Team recommendations regarding pelagic and international fisheries.

## **3. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee**

Michael Goto, Fishing Industry Advisory Committee (FIAC) chair, presented the report and recommendations.

*Regarding North Pacific striped marlin*, the FIAC recommends proceeding with the Council’s preliminary preferred alternative to enact catch limits consistent with WCPFC CMM 2024-06. However, the FIAC notes that the WCPFC measure was developed in a manner that can potentially disadvantage U.S. fishermen.

*Regarding crew training*, the FIAC recommends the Council consider the difficulty of enforcing the person-on-deck requirement in the refinement of the regulatory approach. The FIAC notes that making training available to all crew members is the most effective way to ensure that crew have the knowledge to appropriately respond to protected species handling and release.

*Regarding sharks and shark depredation issues*, the FIAC recommends that the Council:

1. Request that NMFS elevate and prioritize shark depredation mitigation in its 2026 activities.
2. Request federal and state agencies to provide guidance to nonlongline pelagic fisheries operating in federal waters on how they may harvest sharks.
3. Request state and territorial agencies consider prohibiting operations that feed or chum for sharks, noting that these operations may be conditioning shark depredation in nearshore fisheries and may pose a safety issue for spearfishers (among others).

## **4. Scientific and Statistical Committee**

Franklin, SSC member, presented the report and recommendations.

*Regarding the EM status update*:

- The SSC recommends that the Council provide analyses on how proposed alternatives to implement EM can minimize regulatory and financial burden to the longline fisheries, and how these compare to the current observer program.
- The SSC requests that PIFSC provide a presentation summarizing the EM-related technical memorandum content to the 156th SSC meeting.

- The SSC recommends formation of an EM special projects group (with representation from PIFSC and PIRO SFD) to inform scientific, social and economic aspects affected by the switch to EM in the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries.

Franklin reported the SSC had extensive discussion on this topic. Overall, SSC members stated that there are numerous aspects of EM development that need clarity (i.e., regulatory burden, costing, maintenance responsibility and budgetary responsibilities) for the SSC to endorse EM and inform a Council decision in June 2025. SSC noted:

- It is possible to use model-based approaches (instead of the design-based approach presented by PIFSC) to get more reliable bycatch estimates. PIFSC indicated the use of model-based approaches will be considered for future.
- The importance of continued monitoring of longline trips with simultaneous observer and EM onboard to further evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of data collection by each method for different protected species and in different conditions.
- The need for further discussion regarding a strategic long-term plan for using EM to monitor the longline fisheries (i.e., whether it is for data verification capability or for data collection requirements).
- Concern for economic impacts resulting from EM implementation to vessels already operating at low profit margins.

## **5. Fishery Data Collection and Research Committee**

The FDCRC did not meet in advance of the Council meeting.

## **6. Pelagic and International Standing Committee**

Weaver reported on the Pelagic and International Standing Committee discussions on EM, noting that recommendations were deferred to the full Council. Weaver noted that the standing committee discussion pointed out the lack of reporting for striped marlin in the territories that support the striped marlin measures. Discussion on EM also supported the Council's long-standing policy that the federal government carries the costs of the EM for protected species monitoring. Weaver pointed out especially the economic hardship of American Samoa.

## **F. Public Comment**

Chris Hawkins, Lynker, made a public comment regarding the cost of human observer program. He pointed out the efforts of NMFS to sustain the program and transition with the needs of the fishery. Much of the costs are driven by a union for those observers. The union plays a significant role in the labor costs year to year and Lynker does not have immediate control, unlike with other employees who service NOAA programs, divisions and contracts. Lynker has been tightening its nonlabor budgets as a result to be competitive in its bids. On average, over the last several years, Lynker was looking at a 1.8% or 1.9% increase per year for those labor costs. Labor costs have increased at every organization in the country. Hawkins said the increase in observer costs is the accumulation of those percentages over the last 15 to 20 years.

Eric Kingma, HLA, commented that the HLA has supported crew training and contributed around \$15,000-\$20,000 over the past eight or nine months to assist NMFS.

Turnover in the fishery is frequent, so training continuity is needed. Regarding striped marlin, there is a new international measure so there are limitations on what can be done. However, catches of striped marlin have been very high and if the trend continues, the Hawai'i fleet will likely exceed limits and discard a lot of fish. Discarding fish under poor economic conditions is not ideal. HLA supports NMFS's efforts on implementing EM, but funding needs to be sustained. The policy directive on cost allocation states that monitoring costs like EM should be assumed by the agency for the purpose of protected species monitoring. If funding from the agency goes away, there needs to be a clear understanding of how the industry will pay. HLA will not allow the fishery fail and will have to find a way. However, inadequate funding could lead to litigation that may prevent the fleet from continuing to fish. HLA wants more discussion on the cost allocation policy, noting that the outcome of the Loper-Bright Supreme Court ruling has not been discussed and a decision on the case is forthcoming in a few months. Lastly, Kingma noted almost 40% boats lost money in 2022 and 2024 was an even worse year. Fortunately, the fishery is doing better in the first quarter of 2025.

#### **G. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training, the Council:*

- 1. Endorsed the revised draft regulatory approach for implementing crew training, consisting of a certification requirement and a trained person on deck to direct protected species interaction response, provided that NMFS continues to provide accessible video-based training that can accommodate vessel departure schedules.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

*Regarding the revisions to the longline BiOps T&Cs, the Council:*

- 2. Directed staff to provide comments to NMFS on the revisions as follows:**
  - a. Request NMFS build in reasonable contingencies to the crew training T&C language to prevent unnecessary burden on fishery participants when training is not available in a timely manner; and**
  - b. Concur with changes to the insular false killer whale overlap area T&C modifications.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

*Regarding EM, the Council:*

- 3. Requested that PIFSC provide a presentation summarizing the EM-related technical memorandum content at the 156th SSC meeting.**
- 4. Requested that NMFS cover the cost of EM, including administrative and sampling costs, noting the purpose of EM is to monitor protected species interactions in longline fisheries, in lieu of sufficient future human observer coverage.**
- 5. Directed the Action Team to provide analyses on how proposed alternatives to implement EM can minimize regulatory and financial burden to the longline fisheries, and how these compare to the current observer program.**

Malloy asked how the analysis under recommendation #5 would be compared to the observer program, noting that the observer program currently does not incur a cost to the fishery.

Soliai said he was not sure what the concern is, given the recommendation is directing the Action Team to look at costs.

Malloy said she could answer the cost question easily, in that the new program as proposed will have cost to the fisher and the current program does not. She said it is important to understand the costs between the different alternatives for EM, rather than focusing on comparing EM and observer program costs, which may take a lot of time but not provide a lot more information because the human observer program is not sustainable.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

*Regarding WCNPO striped marlin, the Council:*

- 6. Directed the FDCRC further investigate catches of marlin by species and develop means to better identify marlin species in territorial fisheries.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.  
Motion passed.

*Regarding U.S. catch limits for WCNPO striped marlin, the Council:*

- 7. Recommended a catch limit of 393.4 mt and a longline retention limit of 381.5 mt of striped marlin for 2025. The Council further recommends specifying a catch limit of 393.4 mt and a longline retention limit of 381.5 of WCPNO striped marlin for 2026 and 2027. The regional administrator shall by notice specify a catch limit of 393.4 mt and a longline retention limit of 381.5 t, less any overage from the (previous) fishing year.**

**Further, the Council deems that the regulations implementing the recommendations are necessary or appropriate in accordance with Section 303(c) of the MSA. In doing so, the Council directs Council staff to work with NMFS to complete regulatory language to implement the Council's final action. Unless otherwise explicitly directed by the Council, the Council authorizes the Executive Director and the Chairman to review the draft regulations to verify that they are consistent with the Council action before submitting them, along with this determination, to the Secretary on behalf of the Council. The Executive Director and the Chairman are authorized to withhold submission of the Council action and/or proposed regulations and take the action back to the Council if, in their determination, the proposed regulations are not consistent with the Council action.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

*Regarding shark and shark depredation issues, the Council:*

- 8. Requested NMFS elevate and prioritize shark depredation mitigation in its 2026 activities and provide a report on shark interactions in state and territorial fisheries.**

**9. Requested federal and state agencies to provide guidance to nonlongline pelagic fisheries operating in federal waters on how they may harvest sharks.**

**10. Requested state and territorial agencies evaluate the impacts of operations that feed or chum for sharks, noting that these operations may be conditioning shark depredation in nearshore fisheries and may pose a safety issue for spearfishers (among others).**

Sword said there has been excessive shark depredation during tournaments at the banks. Sword also noted the shark activity at a certain fish aggregating device (FAD) because dumping was allowed and made the FAD unusable. The StarKist Samoa offal discharge is 10 miles offshore and the FAD is three miles out, but there is an accumulation of discharge attracting sharks closer to shore, including emulsion from the camp plant.

*Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.  
Motion passed.*

## **VII. Hawai‘i Archipelago**

### **A. Moku Pepa**

Ramsey reported there were a few big storms that hit Hawai‘i during the reporting period, marking the La Niña season. The impacts of the storms affected the shoreline with waves pushing sediment and mud over cars. The south side is usually completely dry, but the recent storm created waterfalls off the cliffs in Makapu‘u and turned streets into rapids. Following these flooding events, the harbors are clogged with debris that causes fish to die, the reef is smothered with sediment, and in some cases, boats end up on shore. There were a few fishing tournaments in January and February. In January, a tackle shop on the North Shore of O‘ahu held a shoreline tournament that issued six tags as a conservation and science measure to better understand the fishery. In February, there was an O‘ahu Pelagic Kayak Tournament where fishers caught marlin and ‘ahi. On Hawai‘i Island, there was a keiki fishing tournament that had 250 anglers with 700 participants bringing in more than 800 pounds of fish. Many fishers used barbless hooks. Another fishing tournament that helped the community was the 1547 Aloha Charity Fishing Tournament, which worked with sportfishing charters to raise money for the Lahaina wildlife recovery efforts. Noteworthy catches included an 11.3-pound paopao that was caught by Tami Sakamoto and a 113-pound ulua that was speared by Taelin Sugimara off Kaua‘i. Unusual catches included a three-foot yellow-bellied sea snake found at Hilo Beach and a slender sunfish that swam ashore at Ma‘alaea Beach on Maui. During the 2024 holiday season, news outlets highlighted the importance of fisheries to Hawai‘i’s economy and culture.

### **B. Division of Aquatic Resources Report**

Bryan Ishida, Hawai‘i DLNR Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR), presented the agency report for November 2024 to January 2025. During the 2024-2025 deep-seven bottomfish fishing year, 280 commercial marine license (CML) holders made 1,029 trips and reported 101,184 pounds in mixed deep-seven species catch. In December 2024, the agency saw the highest catch of deep-seven species since December 2017, which is an indication that the fishery is still alive and well in terms of the demand for red fish during the holiday season, along with



calm weather. For the current fishing year, onaga catches are higher than usual, and DAR will continue to monitor the catch composition ratio between the deep-seven species as the year progresses.

The Kona crab fishery had 25 CML holders making 68 trips and reporting landings of 4,783 pounds. Following the extended closed season and allowance to retain female crabs, an increase in catch was observed, which may be indicative of renewed interest in the fishery. Currently, the Kona crab fishery remains a secondary fishery until DAR observes dedicated highliners or an increased market demand.

For the 2024 uku (green jobfish) season, there were 191 CML holders making 694 trips and reporting landings of 38,012 pounds. This was lower than the previous five years. There was no major spike around May and June, suggesting that there was not much commercial fishing activity reported.

In 2024, there were 2,997 CMLs issued for a revenue of \$423,300. There has been a steady decline in CMLs in the nonlongline and longline sectors combined. This may continue to decline with the implementation of the commercial marine vessel license (CMVL). Regarding license updates, the nonresident recreational marine fishing license is now online and required for all nonresidents who want to fish noncommercially in Hawai‘i. The CMVL is scheduled to be available for online purchase April 15, 2025. This license allows vessel owners with a CML to attain a CMVL so their vessel can cover everyone onboard. Development of the commercial marine dealer license is ongoing, with an anticipated launch in Summer 2025.

Two permits for the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument were issued—one for conservation and management and one for research. There are three permits under review: one for conservation and management, one for research and one for a special ocean use permit. Four FADs were confirmed missing in November 2024, one FAD reported missing and five FADs were replaced in December, and five FADs were replaced in January 2025.

The Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Management Program continues to monitor the invasive anemone, *Anemonia majano*, in Kaneohe Bay. The DAR Aquatic Invasive Species team is working on a plan with stakeholders and communities for removal and eradication. In the 2025 legislative session, H.B. 1220 was introduced, which sought funds for removal and restoration. The AIS team hired a rapid response coordinator to plan development and response coordination for coral disease outbreaks, coral bleaching, storm events, vessel grounds and AIS nuisance species outbreaks.

Ishida said Hawai‘i is now an official member of the PSMFC, and the State is accepting applications through the State Boards and Commission’s website.

Soliai asked as an angler, if he is required to have a nonresident license.

Ishida said yes, this license applies to any nonresident who wants to fish.

### **C. Annual Catch Limit Specifications**

#### **1. Main Hawaiian Islands Uku for 2026 to 2029 (Initial Action)**

Zach Yamada, Council staff, presented the options for the annual catch limit (ACL) specifications of MHI uku for fishing years 2026 to 2029. He also provided a recap of the risk of

overfishing (P\*) and Social, Economic, Ecological and Management Uncertainty (SEEM) scores and how they are applied to the risk tables to specify ABCs and ACLs. PIFSC released an assessment update in December 2024, and a review determined that it was the best scientific information available. At its 201st meeting, the Council directed staff to develop options to specify ABCs and ACLs for consideration at its 202nd meeting. Council staff developed the options based on the results of the 2020 P\* and SEEM working groups, as the stock assessment update used the same modeling approach with new fishery performance and revised survey years. Under option 1, the Council would not specify ACLs for fishing years 2026 to 2029. This option serves as a National Environmental Policy Act baseline but does not comply with National Standard 1 of the MSA and the Hawai'i Archipelago FEP. There are no adverse impacts based on the current catch levels, with the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and overfishing limits being substantially higher than the fishery performance.

Under option 2, the status quo, the Council may specify an ACL based on the previous stock assessment at 295,419 pounds, which correlates with a 41% risk of overfishing, and set an annual catch target (ACT) at 291,010 pounds, which correlates with a 36% risk of overfishing. This option would include an in-season AM to monitor commercial and noncommercial catch based on the Hawai'i CML and Hawai'i Marine Recreational Fishing Survey (HMRFS) data, and close federal waters if the ACT is reached to prevent the ACL from being exceeded. As a post-season AM, the Council may recommend a postseason overage adjustment based on the most recent three-year average. If the most recent three-year catch average does not exceed the ACL, then there would be no overage adjustment; however, if the average is above the ACL, then an overage adjustment would be applied to the next fishing year. This option would also not comply with National Standard 2 under the MSA, which states that management should be based on the best scientific information available.

Under option 3, the Council would specify ACLs based on the 2024 stock assessment update and the findings of the 2020 P\* and SEEM working groups at 406,532 pounds, which correlates with a 41% risk of overfishing, and set an ACT at 401,020 pounds, which correlates with a 36% risk of overfishing. This option would include the AMs described in option 2. This option would be in compliance with the FEP and the MSA, accounts for scientific and management uncertainties quantified through the P\* and SEEM analysis, and does not result in adverse impacts.

Under option 4, the Council would specify ACLs based on the 2024 stock assessment update and the findings of the 2020 P\* and SEEM working groups at 401,020 pounds, which is correlated with a 36% risk of overfishing. As AM, this option would discontinue the in-season AM to close federal waters through monitoring of commercial and noncommercial catch. The APs and plan teams have discussed the uncertainty with HMRFS data for in-season monitoring. He said under options five and six, the Council would specify ACLs lower than the findings of the P\* and SEEM analysis. Options five and six correlate with options three and four, respectively. If the Council specified ACLs lower than the P\* and SEEM analysis, it would be in compliance with the MSA and the FEP. The Council may also recommend implementing AMs that are consistent with previous specifications.

Yamada provided an analysis of the impact of the options, highlighting that there were no adverse impacts on the target and nontarget stocks. The action is not expected to lead to substantial physical, chemical or biological alterations since the fishery uses hook-and-line gear that does not interact with the bottom substrate. This action also has no significant impacts on protected species, biodiversity, ecosystems and habitat.

Ramsey asked if HMRFS data was considered acceptable for in-season monitoring.

Yamada said that in 2019, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine generated a report on the utility of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data (including HMRFS). Based on the results of the study, it was found that MRIP can be used for stock assessments, but is not appropriate for in-season monitoring.

## **2. MHI Deepwater Shrimp and Precious Corals for 2025 to 2028 (Final Action)**

Yamada, Council staff, presented the options for the specification of the MHI deepwater shrimp and precious corals for fishing years 2025-2028 and the most recent fishery statistics associated with catch, effort and participation. He said the first alternative was for the Council to take no action and the current ACL would lapse and no new ACL would be specified for the fisheries. The second alternative would respecify the previously recommended ACLs and result in an ACL for deepwater shrimp at 250,773 pounds and precious corals as listed below:

- Au‘au Channel - black coral - 5,512 pounds
- Makapu‘u Bed - pink coral - 2,205 pounds
- Makapu‘u Bed - bamboo coral - 551 pounds
- 180 Fathom Bank - pink coral - 489 pounds
- 180 Fathom Bank - bamboo coral - 123 pounds
- Brooks Bank - pink coral - 979 pounds
- Brooks Bank - bamboo coral - 245 pounds
- Ka‘ena Point Bed - pink coral - 148 pounds
- Ka‘ena Point Bed - bamboo coral - 37 pounds
- Keahole Bed - pink coral - 148 pounds
- Keahole Bed - bamboo coral - 37 pounds
- Precious coral in the MHI exploratory area - 2,205 pounds

Yamada said that there are no major impacts anticipated due to low participation and effort exerted in these fisheries.

## **D. Fishing Regulations for the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary Final Rule**

Brett Schumacher, PIRO SFD, provided an update on fishing regulations in the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary. The final rule for the sanctuary was published Jan. 16, 2025, and the designation and regulations became effective March 3, 2025. NOAA has reviewed the final sanctuary rule for consistency with the Administration’s policies and EOs, specifically EO 14219, Ensuring Lawful Governance and Implementing the President’s “Department of Government Efficiency” Deregulatory Initiative. This EO requires a review of all regulations to ensure consistency with law and administration policy. To date, NMFS does not have further guidance on its implementation.

PIRO sent a letter to the Council in January stating that the sanctuary regulations were inconsistent with the Council’s previous recommendation for fishing regulations in the MEA. Sanctuary regulations would allow noncommercial fishing in the MEA as authorized under the MSA if two conditions are met; fish harvested 1) do not enter commerce, barter or trade, and are managed sustainably, and 2) fish are not sold for any purpose, including cost recovery. The letter

from PIRO to the Council outlines the expected timeline for the sanctuary regulations, the relevance of the previous Council regulations and the previous recommendation that would require revisions to be consistent with the sanctuary regulations.

In 2023, NOAA accepted most aspects of the Council fishing recommendations, but not the provisions for cost recovery under a Native Hawaiian subsistence practices fishing permit. The MSA requires the secretary of commerce to evaluate proposed measures for consistency with the MSA and other applicable laws (i.e., the National Marine Sanctuaries Act). PIRO notified the Council ahead of its 202nd meeting to afford the Council the opportunity to consider its previous recommendation in light of the inconsistencies identified by NOAA, with respect to cost recovery. The revised recommendation would be considered part of the MSA process for the MEA fishing regulations and would be implemented by NMFS, which prepares the regulatory package to be sent to headquarters for the secretary of commerce to approve, disapprove or partially approve.

Sword said the fishing regulations would allow fishing in the sanctuary, with the limitation that fishers cannot sell their fish, and asked if there are further limitations.

Schumacher said the sanctuary rules are overarching and provide stipulations that fishing would be allowed under the MSA, but fishers cannot sell their fish. There was another provision in the Council recommendation that would allow for selling on a small scale under the Native Hawaiian subsistence practices fishing license to allow for cost recovery. NOAA rejected this provision since it was considered a commercial sale.

Sword asked if the State of Hawai‘i would benefit from the fishing permit in the MEA.

Schumacher said the Council’s permit is a federal permit and would be separate from the State of Hawai‘i permitting system.

Sakoda said the nonresident license is for any fishing based out of Hawai‘i, regardless of whether it is in state waters or not.

Sword asked if the permit would allow a group of 20 fishers from San Diego to fish in the MEA and bring their fish home and sell their catch.

Schumacher said activity would be allowed under the noncommercial fishing permit, with the provision that it is not on a charter fishing operation and the fish was not sold.

Sword asked for clarification on the allowance for charter fishing.

Schumacher said NOAA does not consider charter fishing commercial, but under state rules, it is considered commercial fishing.

Sword said the closure of the sanctuary does not provide any benefit to the nation.

Sakoda asked what would happen if the Council does not revise its recommendation.

Schumacher said if the Council does not revise its recommendation, then NMFS would prepare the draft regulatory package based on the most recent recommendation and send it for the secretary’s review.

Ramsey asked what the expected timeline is for the secretary review.

Schumacher said he is not privy to that decision.

Soliai asked if PIRO or NOAA GCPI could answer the question.

Tucher said inaction means no noncommercial fishing happens. If the Council does not revise its recommendation, then NOAA would proceed with the most recent recommendation that would allow cost recovery under the Native Hawaiian subsistence practice fishing permit. That recommendation will be transmitted again for review, and NMFS will then decide whether it will return the rulemaking package for Council review. If NOAA makes the determination that it cannot decide, then it would put it out for public comment. NMFS and ONMS have determined that the Council's recommendation to allow cost recovery does not meet the purpose and objectives of the sanctuary and therefore would be subject to disapproval. One possible result of the determination would lead to public comment. At the end of the public comment period, NMFS must decide to either revise that portion that is inconsistent or approve that portion of the recommendation.

Simonds asked if NMFS would partially approve, which would allow for the fishing permit without the provision of cost recovery.

Tucher said it was not his decision to make, but there is a circumstance where a permit would be approved for noncommercial fishing and Native Hawaiian subsistence practices without cost recovery.

Schumacher said if EO 14219 results in a change or movement to change the existing sanctuary regulations, then it may change the interpretation of NOAA GCPI. There is uncertainty about how the interpretation could change under the current administration.

Tucher said the sanctuary program would revisit its determination that the Council's recommendation was inconsistent with the policies and objectives of the sanctuary. However, there is uncertainty under the change in administration.

Ramsey asked if the review based on EO 14219 only applies to the sanctuary or to all proposed rules.

Schumacher said the review under EO 14219 would be required for all regulations. Regarding the sanctuary, the proposed rule was published January 16, and the new administration came in January 20. If there is a 60-day period for the agency heads to review all regulations, then there may be a report by mid- to late-April if the regulations were inconsistent and subject to revision.

Simonds said the Council may want to change its recommendation to its original recommendation that would allow sales up to \$15,000. The Council compromised, although the recommendation was reviewed by the agencies and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. The Council should take the opportunity to think carefully about its revision. Most of the members want cost recovery and prefer that the Council and NMFS be consistent with the other monuments. The State of Hawai'i has different views and different laws, and this is a time for the Council to consider what it would like to do.

Soliai said there is a lot of uncertainty, and the Council members do not know where this review is headed. He asked if it would be more prudent to wait until the review is completed before the Council takes action.

Schumacher said he did not know what the review would produce. There are different variables that could come into play, and the Council needs to balance and weigh its decision on its own.

Soliai said the Council could take the opportunity to help inform and provide feedback on the review.

Simonds said the Council could make a recommendation to the administration at this meeting. This recommendation would need discussion and thought before it moves forward.

Ramsey asked if there is a deadline for the Council to make a recommendation.

Schumacher said the EO provided a 60-day deadline for the agency to have a report.

## **E. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

### **1. Advisory Panel**

Kuali'i reported on the AP report and recommendations.

*Regarding MHI uku ACL specifications*, the Hawai'i AP does not have a preferred alternative.

The AP recommends the Council request NMFS PIFSC to provide a timeline for the implementation and expected outcomes of the uku pilot survey to better understand noncommercial catch. Further, the Hawai'i AP recommends the Council request NMFS PIFSC to provide an overview of available data to determine the feasibility of minimum and maximum slot limits based on life history information.

*Regarding MHI deepwater shrimp and precious corals ACL specification*, the Hawai'i AP recommends option 2, status quo to respecify the existing ACL for fishing years 2025-2028.

The Hawai'i AP also discussed the potential use of slot limits as part of the management of the uku fishery.

### **2. Joint Plan Team**

Marlowe Sabater, Archipelagic Plan Team chair, reported on the joint Plan Team meeting report and recommendations.

*Regarding MHI uku*, the Plan Team recommends the Council specify an ACL at  $P^*=36\%$  based on the 2020  $P^*$  and SEEM analysis. Further, the Plan Team recommends discontinuing in-season monitoring due to the uncertainty in data and specify a post season three-year average overage adjustment AM.

Sabater said NOAA relies on the HMRFS and MRIP data sets to track catch in-season and there is large uncertainty with the two-month waves that could lead to a potential problem for the fishery where it could prematurely hit the ACL based on only a few interviews.

*Regarding shrimp and precious coral ACLs, since there is no new scientific info available, the Plan Team recommends the Council select option 2, to roll over the current ACLs.*

### **3. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee**

There were no FIAC recommendations regarding the Hawai‘i Archipelago.

### **4. Scientific and Statistical Committee**

Franklin provided the SSC report and recommendations.

*Regarding setting the ABC for MHI uku, the SSC recommends option 3, to set an ABC of 408,957 pounds based on the 2024 stock assessment update and the findings of the 2020 P\* analysis. The SSC notes that this level of catch is above MSY and that catch rates will likely decline at those levels. The SSC further recommends maintaining the three-year overage adjustment as a post-season AM.*

Franklin reported the SSC discussed the proportion of commercial catch versus noncommercial catch in federal versus state waters, as well as seasonal targeting of uku aggregations. He said the SSC also determined that in-season AMs would not be feasible due to data reporting limitations for noncommercial catch through HMRFS. He also said the SSC noted that setting an ABC based on the 2024 stock assessment update would result in the SSC recommending an ABC that is approximately 40% greater than the 2024 MSY estimate. This would likely result in declining catch rates and population size over the medium- to long-term, and the SSC suggested communicating this concept to fishers.

*Regarding the review of ABC for precious corals and deepwater shrimp, the SSC recommends option 2, maintaining the current ABCs (status quo) for precious corals and deepwater shrimp. The SSC further recommends that the assessments of these fisheries be updated.*

Franklin said that the SSC discussed the potential destabilizing effect that the high ACLs and low historical catch rates may have on these fisheries (e.g., new entrant harvesting the stocks in a highly efficient way), and said the SSC would like to review confidential data when fishery participation is low.

### **5. Program Planning Standing Committee**

There were no Program Planning Standing Committee recommendations regarding the Hawai‘i Archipelago.

### **F. Public Comment**

Ian Chun, a Hawai‘i black coral fisherman, said he is the only permit holder and thanked the Council for the work it does. As a resident of Hawai‘i who earns his living from commercial fishing, he appreciated the Council’s dedication to management through science, culture and socioeconomic impacts that guide the democratic decision-making process. He said he sent in a public comment regarding the precious coral fishery and appreciated the response received from Council staff. He understands that the Board of Land and Natural Resources may be the appropriate agency to address his questions; however, with the representatives from all of the agencies present, he requested clarification of the authority on the management of the ‘Au‘au

Channel. The precious coral fishery is unique, and the 'Au'au Channel lies within both state and federal waters. Understanding the need for reporting, Hawai'i has experienced increased pressure both at the Board of Land and Natural Resources and the legislature to comply with Hawai'i Revised Statutes Chapter 343, the Hawai'i Environmental Policy Act. This led to the closure of the aquarium fishery, and with S.B. 1074, which exempts ocean recreation activities, he is concerned about how this could affect the precious coral fishery and commercial fishing in general. Historically, the Council has developed environmental assessments to set quotas, but most of the 'Au'au Channel bed lies within state waters. The precious coral fishery is one of the most technical and expensive fisheries. He said he cannot absorb risk without interagency clarification. If the state closes the fishery in state waters, he asked if he would be able to land precious corals extracted in federal waters at state boat harbors. If there is a closure in state waters, he wanted to know how this would impact the quotas that the Council specifies for the fishery.

### **G. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding MHI uku ACLs, the Council:*

- 1. Recommended, as initial action, option 4 to specify ACLs at 401,020 pounds for fishing years 2026 to 2029, which has a 36% risk of overfishing as reduced by the P\* and SEEM processes. The Council recommended discontinuing the in-season closure AM. Therefore, the Council recommended a post-season AM in which, if the average catch of the three most recent years exceeds the specified ACL in a given fishing year, the ACL for the subsequent fishing year will be reduced by the amount of the overage.**

**Further, the Council directs staff to work with the Action Team to develop a document for final action at the Council's next meeting in June 2025.**

Tucher said the Council may not want to discontinue in-season monitoring, but to discontinue an in-season closure. The Council will want to continue to have in-season monitoring.

Yamada said there is uncertainty about the in-season monitoring of noncommercial catch through the HMRFS survey, which may prematurely close the fishery.

Simonds asked if PIFSC wanted to discontinue in-season monitoring.

Ahrens, PIFSC, said that PIFSC wants to continue to collect data from the fishery in-season, and the agency does not want to use that data to track the ACL in-season to close the fishery. PIFSC prefers to proceed with the post-season overage adjustment based on the most recent three-year average.

Yamada said the Council may continue to keep in-season monitoring, but the mechanism to close the fishery would be discontinued. The in-season AM has two parts that include monitoring and the in-season closure. The motion is to discontinue the in-season closure due to the variability of the HMRFS catch expansion.

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.



*Regarding MHI uku ACLs, the Council:*

- 2. Requested NMFS PIFSC to provide an overview of available data to determine the feasibility of minimum and maximum slot limits based on life history information.**

*Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.*

*Motion passed.*

*Regarding MHI deepwater shrimp and precious coral ACLs, the Council:*

<b>MUS/MUS Complex</b>	<b>Fishing Years</b>	<b>ACL (pounds)</b>
MHI deepwater shrimp	2026-2028	250,773
MHI precious corals		
‘Au‘au channel - black coral	2025-2028	5,512
Makapu‘u bed - pink coral	2025-2028	2,205
Makapu‘u bed - bamboo coral	2025-2028	551
180 fathom bank - pink coral	2025-2028	489
180 fathom bank - bamboo coral	2025-2028	123
Brooks bank - pink coral	2025-2028	979
Brooks bank - bamboo coral	2025-2028	245
Ka‘ena point bed - pink coral	2025-2028	148
Ka‘ena point bed - bamboo coral	2025-2028	37
Keahole bed - pink coral	2025-2028	148
Keahole bed - bamboo coral	2025-2028	37
Precious coral in MHI exploratory area	2025-2028	2,205

- 3. Recommended, as final action, NMFS implement the following ACLs:**

**Implement a post-season AM where the Council will review catches relative to each ACL at the end of each fishing year. If NMFS and the Council determine the three-year average catch for the fishery exceeds the ACL, NMFS will reduce the ACL for that fishery in the subsequent year by the amount of the overage.**

**As specified in each FEP as a higher performance measure, if an ACL is exceeded more than once in a four-year period, the Council will re-evaluate the ACL process and adjust the system, as necessary, to improve its effectiveness.**

**Further, the Council deems that the regulations implementing the recommendations are necessary or appropriate in accordance with Section 303(c) of the MSA. In doing so, the Council directs Council staff to work with NMFS to complete regulatory language to implement the Council's final action. Unless otherwise explicitly directed by the Council, the Council authorizes the Executive Director and the Chairman to review the draft regulations to verify that they are consistent with the Council action before submitting them, along with this determination, to the Secretary on behalf of the Council. The Executive Director and the Chairman are authorized to withhold submission of the Council action and/or proposed regulations and take the action back to the Council if, in their determination, the proposed regulations are not consistent with the Council action.**

*Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.*

*Motion passed.*

*Regarding MHI deepwater shrimp and precious coral ACLs, the Council:*

**4. Requested NMFS PIFSC update the assessment on deepwater shrimp and precious corals by 2028.**

*Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.*

*Motion passed.*

## **VIII. Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items**

There were no public comments on non-agenda items.

## **IX. Program Planning and Research**

### **A. Legislative Report**

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, presented the legislative report, pointing out the appropriateness of providing the presentation on Kuhio Day, in honor of Hawai'i's first congressional representative. He provided a quick background on how bills become laws and noted that this is the first year of Congress's 119th session. Bills reintroduced in this session included H.R. 207 SHARKED Act of 2025 that passed the House in early January and the South Pacific Tuna Treaty Act of 2025. Congress has focused on the ESA and MMPA, holding an oversight hearing in the House Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries to evaluate their implementation. H.R. 1897, a bill that would amend the ESA, also received a hearing in the subcommittee. ESA and MMPA issues are likely to continue to be reviewed for the rest of this session.

Other bills of interest to the Council include S.B. 283, the Illegal Red Snapper and Tuna Enforcement Act, introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and cosponsored by Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawai'i, which addresses country-of-origin labeling. Another is H.R. 562, the BLUE Pacific Act, introduced by Rep. Ed Case of Hawai'i, which focuses on strengthening partnerships and collaboration in the Pacific. There are other interests in Congress reviewing single species such as red snapper, as well as tackling issues such as deep sea mining and offshore wind.

Soliai said he attended the two Congressional Subcommittee on the Water, Wildlife and Fisheries hearings in late February and another hearing in March for the Subcommittee on Indian

and Insular Affairs. It is very interesting to see what is happening in Congress and how the members are more engaged on issues such as MMPA and ESA. The latter hearing was on the role of Insular Affairs in fostering prosperity in the Pacific and participants noted the issues regarding China in the Pacific and regulations that hinder prosperity. He said Congress is also looking at federal overreach on issues that impact communities due to the Loper-Bright decision.

Muña said there were various ESA bills and asked if the bills would be combined. She said it is a good opportunity for the Council to get involved by include language on cultural take or addressing the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles, and noted the territories should engage in the conversation. She also said ESA issues such as the giant clam proposed listing has an impact on economic growth for the islands.

DeMello replied that the Council cannot lobby but there is merit in communicating the Council's position and it may be included in the Council Coordination Committee's working paper on MSA changes. He said his best guess is that H.R. 1897 will be the main bill for ESA and that if the other bills have merit, the introducers will need to add it into the main bill through amendments.

Muña asked if the Council could send letters to the secretaries of each agency with the Council's position.

Simonds replied that in the past, the Council would make the issues known to the administration and everyone has a congressional representative that they can talk to as territorial citizens.

Weaver said there needs to be a cultural take of turtles because his ancestors were living off the turtles and asked the Council to continue to pursue a cultural take. He also said giant clams have economic value and also show tradition and culture, which would be prohibited under the proposed listing.

Simonds said if you do not practice it, you lose it.

Soliai agreed saying that is how cultures get extinguished, because you do not practice your culture.

## **B. Status of Executive Orders**

Yamada and Fitchett, Council staff, presented on several EOs and presidential actions since the previous Council meeting. Staff reviewed the EOs and identified ones that would affect fisheries and the Council, including EO 14148 that revoked previous EOs on diversity, equity and inclusion, EO 14150 that puts America First in terms of foreign policy, EO 14151 that ends waste in government and EO 14158 that establishes the Department of Government Efficiency. There are direct and indirect impacts from these EOs that affect Council actions, federal funding and staffing resources to implement fishery regulations. Other EOs and presidential memos have produced regulatory freezes, reduction of federal bureaucracy, deregulation and termination of federal advisory committees such as the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee.

Some EOs could affect the ability for territories to participate in international meetings as well as the availability of adequate staffing from federal agencies. Tariffs could also be implemented through the various EOs under the authorities of different agencies, including the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR). While there have not been any fishery-specific

tariffs, they could be included in tariffs on agricultural products. The threat of reciprocal tariffs is expected and may affect the quantity of imports into the U.S. seafood market. The USTR requested comments on proposed actions to implement restrictions on Chinese maritime and shipbuilding sectors, which would add restrictions or fees on Chinese shipping and shipbuilding activities. This may impact American Samoa, which receives deliveries from Hong Kong vessels and brings in goods at a much lower premium.

Sword asked if the tariffs included fish that originated in Vietnam or Thailand.

Fitchett said there are no specific tariffs on products coming from Vietnam or other Southeast Asian countries and that China has a 25% tariff on goods including seafood and agricultural products. He said there is the possibility of additional tariffs on other products but nothing has been mentioned for fisheries specifically.

Sword said the Council should be pushing for country-of-origin labeling as well as the tariffs. Last year, the Council talked to the USTR and he did not know that the cannery also processes loins from Chinese fish coming through Thailand and Vietnam as part of the canning process. Production using loins could be increased in American Samoa. He also said 80% of the goods coming to American Samoa are from Chinese vessels so there would be a big impact to the territory.

Ramsey said there have been many limitations on education and on outreach or capacity building with the EOs. He asked if that will have an impact on the Council's ability to engage with the next generation and with schools doing outreach or fisheries engagement.

Yamada said there was a recent EO pertaining to the Department of Education but he was unsure what the impacts would be on the Council.

Muña asked if the directive to remove 10 regulations for every new regulation under EO 14192 provides an opportunity for input on proposed and existing regulations that the Council might want to see removed.

Yamada said this is an opportunity for the Council to discuss it.

Muña said there are concerns with critical habitat for corals, green sea turtles and the proposed giant clam listing that the Council might consider requesting NOAA to remove.

Sword said the Council should put together a list of regulations that should be taken off the books.

Yamada said there is a document in the briefing materials that identifies the regulations for removal for the Council's consideration.

Muña said while she loves the environment, these regulations and proposed regulations hamper their ability to manage their own resources and it is insulting to indigenous people. There are populations of various species at risk, but Guam is capable of addressing these issues independently and does not need to be told that its efforts are wrong based on outside perspectives. She said she agrees with the administration that regulations should be rescinded and not imposed to alleviate unnecessary regulatory burdens placed on the people.

Soliai said he agreed with Muña and that a lot of these regulations are driven by lawsuits and petitions. There is a lack of data or threats in other places that have nothing to do with the territories, resulting in unnecessary regulations being imposed on the Pacific territories without due process. He said ESA regulations hamper their ability to restock giant clams or do anything with them. He also said American Samoa sent a comment letter to the USTR regarding the shipping issue. In 2024, there were 17 Hong Kong container vessels that called into Pago Pago harbor, two Hong Kong tankers, one Chinese tanker and one Chinese longliner for emergency repair; all of which would be impacted by the USTR proposal. He said he was unsure how tariffs would impact American Samoa as steel and aluminum tariffs could also impact the cannery.

Sword said he agrees that regulations are getting very onerous and need to be reviewed. He also said a lot of netting and chain come from South America where the tariffs are, so there will be additional impacts not just on the cannery but on the fisheries.

Fitchett said there are other concerns such as the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services looking into revising the list of substances regarded as safe. This could impact the fisheries that use carbon monoxide or other means of treating tuna and their ability to import to the United States.

Sword said other countries are allowed to do the wrong thing and advertise a product as fresh fish when it is not, and may be treated with toxic chemicals.

Soliai said this needs to be looked at from several angles because there is an EO that looks at labeling. A lot of fish that are coming into the United States are not properly labeled and there are health issues and other reasons proper labeling is needed.

### **C. Inclusion of a Tier 6 Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rule in the Fishery Ecosystem Plans (Final Action)**

DeMello presented for final action an amendment to each of the FEPs that would include a Tier 6 to the ABC control rule in the ACL specification process. The Council had previously looked at this issue as part of the revision of the American Samoa BMUS. In revising the MUS, additional provisions under the MSA are required such as essential fish habitat (EFH), bycatch and the process for specifying ACLs. A Plan Team working group developed a way to incorporate new ideas and an alternative approach to satisfy the ACL provision, adding a Tier 6 to the current ABC control rule.

Under the new approach, a sixth tier would be available to the SSC to establish a control rule using a rate-based approach and thereby also providing PIFSC with an alternative way to generate stock assessments. The Council took initial action in December 2024 and selected a preliminarily preferred alternative applying the Tier 6 ABC control rule to all of its FEPs. The Council may discuss final action on alternatives that include no action or including Tier 6 as an ABC control rule. No action would result in the Tier 6 ABC control rule only being applied to the American Samoa FEP. DeMello provided the impacts of each alternative noting that the action is largely administrative and provides another tool for scientists and managers.

### **D. Status of Western Pacific National Marine Sanctuaries**

DeMello said the Council received an email from the superintendent of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument regarding the status of the proposed Pacific

Islands Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. It noted that NOAA withdrew its review from the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs and is looking at having additional discussions with the new administration. He said there is likely a pause in that designation and there will be a report after those discussions with the new administration.

#### **E. Report on Inflation Reduction Act Program Projects**

Mark Mitsuyasu, Council staff, presented an update on the IRA program projects and said the Council put three of four contracts in place. One of the contracts began in March 2025 to conduct community consultation and capacity building, and the contractor and Council staff held meetings in the Mariana Islands and the Big Island prior to the Council meeting.

Alex Min, PIFG, provided an update on the results of the community consultation meetings in the Mariana Islands. The meetings began in late February and concluded in March with seven meetings engaging the community and hearing its feedback on regulations, challenges and barriers. Participants were asked about environmental changes and what their communities are seeing, what policies or regulations present barriers to fishing, and what the future of fishing looks like for them and future generations. A big theme of the meetings was that fishers feed families and that the management of these waters impacts the communities. Fishers also reported that seasons are shifting, seasonal runs are coming later for some species and shark depredation is a big issue that is destroying their livelihoods. There were also concerns that some communities are not being counted when their fish are landed, such as in Rota and the Northern Islands of the CNMI. He provided video clips of community members at the meetings sharing their perspectives on why fishing is important to them. PIFG will continue to hold community meetings over the two-year project to explore what actions can be taken to support people regionwide.

Weaver said the testimonies presented show that the community is really involved in this matter. He said tourism is no longer present in the CNMI, which means fewer jobs, and that people now rely on natural resources as their primary means of survival.

Ramsey said it is extremely hard to get fishermen to provide comments and input and it takes skill and trust building. It is something that the Council cannot stop doing because that information is critical.

Makaiau said the issue of shark depredation has been around for many years and one of the difficulties is that NMFS is not seeing it in the data, whether the data forms do not allow for it or the fishermen are just not reporting it. There is a need to determine how the agency can obtain that data and what ideas fishermen have for providing it, whether through a federally funded study or fishermen-driven project. It is important to hear what fishermen say on how to collect that data because it has impacts on a lot of different aspects, including endangered species.

Min said it starts with the hotspots, going out to the areas where shark activity is a big issue. CNMI, Guam, Kona and Hale‘iwa are places that fishermen identified as problem areas. Other meeting locations did not identify sharks as a problem, so understanding the root cause, why perceptions differ and what is happening in the community is the starting point. From a community consultation perspective, this was the topic that was of utmost concern from Kona fishermen, saying they lost six of six ‘ahi in a day, landing six of 28 bottomfish and just quitting. There may be a disparity between the data and what people are seeing on the water. Collecting it will be a challenge due to widespread distrust stemming from how previous data has impacted the community. Moving forward, fishermen want to engage and be part of the conversation. The

Kona crowd wants to come and have this conversation but are also concerned about what might happen with this data.

Soliai said American Samoa will have similar stories regarding shark depredation. It is happening everywhere, but it is good to find out how to capture that data; maybe interviews with fishermen is another tool. Fishermen have distrust with sharing their data— what happens to it and how they are impacted by it.

Min said some of the shark data does exist in the Council's annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Reports through the fishermen observations section started four years ago. He said those that manage the fisheries should get out to these meetings and in the community. It is important to start now and maintain and continue the relationship to work together to better the community and support fishermen.

Itibus asked the Council to continue engaging the community on these issues, emphasizing their importance. He said addressing the shark depredation situation is critical, as fishermen are experiencing significant losses.

Perez asked what the biggest concern was from the fishermen in Guam.

Min said sharks were an issue and that regulations were another big issue, specifically in Merizo. That community talked about closures and not being able to practice traditional *talaya* fishing or provide opportunities for their youth.

Perez asked if there were a lot of comments regarding enforcement.

Min said most of the comments received on enforcement were regarding the marine preserve that neighbored Merizo.

Sword said it is tough to gain fishermen's trust and gave an example of the bottomfish fishery. He said when the scientists came to American Samoa [with the stock assessment results] the fishermen were angry because they knew there was not a problem with the bottomfish stock. He also said the shark depredation is a big problem in American Samoa and has gotten worse over the last several years. Fishermen cannot troll on some banks because there are sharks everywhere.

Simonds said there are surveys in the territories that interview fishermen and asked if there was a question about sharks on those surveys. There needs to be a better job of collecting the data through the existing surveys done in the territories and the State of Hawai'i. She said there is no money coming from the federal government for this work so the Council needs to look elsewhere to see what is being done by places like the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology that can help with research. Improving the surveys and determining what needs to be improved would help verify what the communities are saying.

Weaver said fishermen normally do not speak up at meetings and they did at the community meeting he participated in because trust was established. He said he looked forward to future meetings in the CNMI.

Min said they have a long way to go as there is an inherent distrust and engaging with the community will be more important over the next year.

Soliai said the issue of sharks is not isolated to the Council's island areas and that over the last couple of years, other Pacific Island countries are facing the same thing so it may be a Pacific-wide problem. He asked if the meetings have been scheduled for American Samoa.

Min said not at this time and appreciated any assistance in developing the schedule.

## **F. Report on Status of Territorial Fishery Management Plans**

### **1. American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources**

Domingo Ochavillo, DMWR, presented an update on the status of the American Samoa Bottomfish FMP. He said the draft territorial FMP was developed in 2021 with technical support from Council staff, including Sabater, during a time when the bottomfish stock was overfished and experiencing overfishing. He noted that the territorial FMP was intended to complement the federal FMP, as the territory manages fisheries from zero to three nautical miles.

The initial draft FMP included sections on the scope of the plan, stock status, fishery background, data streams and objectives. It also included a review of territorial and federal management measures, and preliminary considerations for management tools such as mandatory reporting and an annual proclamation. Since the stock is no longer overfished or experiencing overfishing, there has been a decline in interest in the FMP. However, he said it was time to revisit and revise the draft FMP, especially considering new developments including the revision of the bottomfish MUS list and potential application of the Tier 6 ABC control rule. He emphasized the need to clearly define roles and responsibilities and requested technical support to continue developing the plan, citing lack of funding as a major challenge. The draft FMP was presented at the recent AP meeting and DMWR is developing a timeline for its completion, including revisions to reflect the updated BMUS list to ensure consistency with the federal FMP.

### **2. Guam Department of Agriculture**

Muña presented the Guam DOAG's FMP. She said it is a work in progress between DAWR and a contractor from the University of Guam Sea Grant. In the FMP development process, stock assessments were used to identify 28 species that comprise 70% of landings. The assessment was done using meta-analysis of the research by Peter Houk and Brett Taylor in the Mariana Archipelago and Micronesia. The first meeting was in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and had close to 40 online participants. A major component of the process included community outreach in northern, central and southern Guam. Subgroups were created to create better input and included a fishermen subgroup, and two scientist and manager subgroups.

These subgroups developed proposals including a ban on vulnerable species, size limits, mandatory licensing for commercial fishing, bag limits, maintaining the efficacy of the marine protected areas (MPAs), spawning protection and different limits for commercial and recreational vessels. The process is at a stage that requires both science-based, data-driven decision-making and the involvement from the fishing community to draft the actual management measures. Community meetings will again be held to ensure there are no surprises with any proposed actions.

A digital survey was conducted using WhatsApp to different fishing groups who did not join the meetings, to ensure the whole community was reached. The survey asked about different types of management measures and what the fishers would support within the FMP. Feedback



was ranked with size limits leading the list, followed by commercial versus recreational fishing, maintaining the MPAs, a temporary ban on vulnerable species, bag limits, marine-managed areas, temporary bans on certain fishing gear and tighter restrictions on certain fishing gear. The consensus from the fishing community was to regulate both commercial and recreational fishing, with stricter regulations for commercial fishing.

The next step is to bring together the stock assessment science and the fishing community to begin drafting management measures for 10 species. There will also be discussion on whether to impose mandatory licensing for commercial fishers and mandatory reporting for recreational fishing. Mandatory reporting with commercial fishing could be done at the point of sales with commercial buyers. Initial discussions on mandatory reporting for recreational fishing indicate that it is unlikely to be implemented to lessen the burden on fishers. Another discussion was a total ban on bumphead parrotfish and size limits of 12 inches in length for bluefin trevally, band-faced parrotfish, steephead parrotfish, long-nosed parrotfish and other species of parrotfish and fishes. One proposal is to implement a total ban on sales of sizes less than 12 inches. The long-term goal is to ensure that listed species reach spawning age, protect their reproductive capacity and support the ecosystem balance and subsistence needs, while still allowing recreational fishing. More community meetings are scheduled to talk about spatial regulations and other management measures. The expected completion date for the FMP is September 2025.

Ramsey asked what the driving force was that convinced noncommercial fishermen to be interested in mandatory licensing.

Muña replied the noncommercial fishers see the difficulty in catching nearshore reef fish. They realize they spend a lot of time fishing and get frustrated with certain fishing groups they see harvesting fish and claim they are commercial or recreational but are catching large amounts. This is not subsistence or just for family or neighbors, so fishermen feel there is a need for licensing to know who is fishing and a way to track their information.

Sakoda asked if the FMP comes first before any regulations or will the regulations be implemented before the FMP.

Muña said they are doing both at the same time because the plan is being developed with the community. The FMP will be put through the Guam Administrative Adjudication process which includes public hearings before it is finalized and sent to the governor for review and to the Guam legislature for adoption.

Sakoda asked if the FMP includes a monitoring plan where the effectiveness of the regulations are assessed.

Muña said yes, DOAG is applying for grant funding from the USFWS Sport Fish Restoration funding to ensure monitoring is included.

### **3. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Department of Lands and Natural Resources**

Michael Tenorio, DFW, provided a brief update on the status of the CNMI FMP. DFW has held several coordination meetings with PIFSC, PIRO and Northern Marianas College (NMC) to discuss drafting options for the plan. In addition, DFW and NMC collaborated on a

proposal to Sea Grant, with the aim of supporting community education and outreach during the development process, as well as collecting input from local stakeholders.

A draft version of the management plan has been developed and shared with key partners for review. Revisions are being made as staff time and resources allow. Looking ahead, DFW will continue coordinating efforts to refine the draft document and maintain communication with its collaborators as the plan progresses. Should the Sea Grant proposal be approved, the outreach phase with community stakeholders will be implemented. If the proposal is not funded, DFW will continue developing the plan using any available existing internal resources. The agency is also actively seeking additional funding to further support the plan's completion.

Currently, one of the main challenges in the CNMI is the absence of funding dedicated specifically to the development of the FMP. Despite this, DFW remains committed to advancing the plan by maximizing available resources. Stakeholder input, especially from both recreational and commercial fishermen, is considered essential to the success of the plan. DFW is determined to move forward, with a focus on inclusivity and community engagement.

Soliai asked whether DFW planned to engage with fishermen in a manner similar to Guam's efforts, or if those activities were contingent on the availability of funding.

Tenorio said DFW intends to continue advancing its efforts regardless of funding limitations. He said while some funding sources have specific constraints tied to designated projects, the agency does its best to work within those limits as staff and resources allow. One of the current goals is to create safe and open spaces for stakeholders, particularly commercial fishers, to share their concerns. He said bringing market-based participants into these types of meetings can be challenging.

Igisomar asked for an update on recent communications with PIRO regarding funding and support for the management plan.

Tenorio said ongoing email exchanges with Gerry Davis at PIRO have focused on identifying support for the FMP. He said recent administrative changes have caused some delays in the process. However, a meeting with PIRO is scheduled and expected to clarify next steps and potential avenues for obtaining further assistance in moving the plan forward.

## **G. Council Education and Outreach Report**

Amy Vandehey, Council staff, provided the education and outreach report for the period of December 2024 through the end of February 2025. The Council published the winter issue of its newsletter that was distributed through its email list of 3,600 people with printed copies shared at different events. Article highlights included the Council's priorities aligning with the new administration's goals, integrating traditional knowledge into annual fishery reports and highlighting fishery capacity-building efforts in CNMI. Other efforts included publication of a monograph titled "Public Involvement in Outreach for Sustainable Fisheries in the Western Pacific Region," and the relaunch of the Council's Speakers Bureau, expanding from Hawai'i to each island area.

In response to a request from the Guam Department of Education to participate in an event at the Jose Rios Middle School in January, Audrey Toves from the Council's Non-Commercial Fisheries Advisory Committee and Brent Tibbatts from Guam DAWR talked with

more than 150 students about fishing and using the lunar calendar to make fishing successful. They also talked about pathways into marine fisheries careers and provided information on the tides and moon phases from the lunar calendar. The Council has also supported the community meetings, as presented in a prior agenda item. There was quite a bit of effort to reach out to the fishing community to get them to the meetings using newspaper ads, press releases, emails, social media and WhatsApp fishermen groups. Fishermen were provided with outreach materials at each of the meetings.

Soliai asked if the Council had an Instagram or TikTok account.

Vandehey said the Council primarily uses Facebook and Instagram but also has LinkedIn and YouTube accounts. She said the Council used to have Twitter/X, but stopped using it because it became incompatible with the SocialPilot scheduling program used. It does not have a TikTok account.

Soliai asked about those other mediums because the youth are constantly on those more than Facebook.

Ramsey asked about the Council's most successful way to connect.

Vandehey said Instagram has the most engagement, with more people liking, sharing and commenting. However, it is less flexible on what can be shared as Facebook allows for longer posts, links, etc. Instagram primarily has pictures but you have to go elsewhere for a link and it is not as direct for sharing information.

Ramsey asked if the level of engagement across platforms is the same across the region or differs with each island area.

Vandehey said it differs by island area. WhatsApp is bigger in the territories than in Hawai'i. Radio and newspapers are still big in some places.

Sword said he tends to look at YouTube and asked if the Council had anything there.

Vandehey said the Council has a YouTube account under "wpcouncil."

Sword said last month there was outreach organized by the local game fishing association in American Samoa called Passport to Fishing that involved a lot of youth. It was very successful and said is another opportunity that the Council can help support and engage with the youth.

Vandehey said the Council supports the Island Coordinators to have tables and outreach information when they hear about events.

## **H. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

### **1. Advisory Panel**

Clay Tam, AP chair, presented the AP meeting report and recommendations. He said he appreciated the Council family's support in the IRA meetings as every meeting had staff, Island Coordinators, AP members and Council members. Having that kind of support was a big plus for those meetings. He said he looked forward to attending the next meetings and asked for help from the other island areas. He said the value of the meetings is that fishermen came to share.

*Regarding CNMI IRA projects, the CNMI AP requests the Council consider the impacts of introduced species in the regulatory review as well as conducting engagement with the communities after the fishing tournament season.*

Soliai said the Council appreciates the work that the AP does throughout the region because a lot of the Council work relies on the feedback that the AP has with the stakeholders.

## **2. Joint Plan Team**

Sabater presented the joint Plan Team report and recommendations.

*Regarding Tier 6, the Plan Team supports option 2-adding to all FEPs.*

Sabater reported the Plan Team had a lot of discussions about the applicability of the Tier 6 ABC control rule and that having it would be timely since a lot of the assessments are transitioning toward other methods. American Samoa is an example where PIFSC uses spawning potential ratio as a status determination criterion and there are many data-limited stocks in the FEPs. He said there is overwhelming support for moving forward with the Tier 6 ABC control rule as it gives scientists and managers an additional tool in the toolbox and flexibility on how they can handle data-limited stocks without having to use weight to track the catch.

Soliai asked if it would reduce the time in capturing the data if they focused only on the weight.

Sabater said length information is already being collected in the creel surveys. Estimating total catch is an additional step when an assessment is done. That is then converted to weight, so this would simplify the process and provide additional tools for possibly using minimum size as an AM rather than tracking ACLs for data-limited situations.

## **3. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee**

There were no FIAC recommendations regarding Program Planning.

## **4. Scientific and Statistical Committee**

Camacho, SSC member, presented the SSC report, highlighting the status of SSC special projects. He said the SSC is working to implement the new strategic plan endorsed by the Council at the December meeting. To implement the strategic plan, the SSC developed a list of special projects intended to inform the Council regarding the effects of fishery management actions on cultural resources, fishery economics and fish and protected species populations.

Two process-related projects were initiated in preparation for the March meeting. The first was a working group that developed a presentation on methods to make, communicate and integrate biological, economic, social and cultural considerations into recommendations. The second working group developed a presentation on how cultural and social information have been obtained and integrated into SSC recommendations.

The SSC had wide-ranging discussion regarding topics such as the different fields of science that fit within the remit of the SSC and what “taking the science into account” means,

especially when considering the human dimensions. The SSC also updated the special projects list with work plans for the remainder of the year, and the full list is included in the appendix of the SSC report.

## **5. Program Planning Standing Committee**

Soliai reported the Program Planning Standing Committee met and deferred action to the full Council.

### **I. Public Comment**

Ilaoa, AP vice Chair for American Samoa, provided public comment. Regarding USTR concerns, the AP has had discussions with some of the local shipping companies, and he said he would like to see the Council keep an eye on any developments. The two vessels that bring freight in from the West Coast are both Chinese-manufactured vessels so the costs would be absorbed by the consumers in the territory. He also said the American Samoa DMWR should use the Catchit Logit app as a tool to address shark depredation and there should be a more concerted push to get fishermen to use the app. This provides a way to collect data on shark depredation through an app that is already in place. Ilaoa said he runs an AP Facebook page but according to his sons, Facebook is for dinosaurs. He said if there is a chance to learn how to use some of the newer social media, that would be helpful.

Tam, PIFG, provided public comment. He said travel for the IRA meetings was interesting from the perspective of an AP member that is trying to define the small-boat fishery. The small-boat fishery is the heartbeat of the territories. Aside from the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fleet, the rest of the fisheries are small boats and that is where the biggest impact will come from. The small-boat fishery does not have an individual take permit (for protected species) and is a heartbeat away from being sued and shutting down the fishery. That is a problem when they get lumped into bigger management schemes for sharks such as oceanic whitetip. The small boats must deal with a whole slew of shark species and management comes down and says no take of any sharks alienates the fishermen that were a part of the ecosystem. He said what he observed on the IRA trips was that areas closed to fishing had a lot of sharks and bigger fish, which makes sense because there is more food. He said the trend is that when an area is closed, there are more problems such as in the NWHI that saw an increase in sharks and apex predators. Wherever closures occur, shark problems follow. There should be an understanding of human's role in the ecosystem. Blanket legislation is wrong, especially when there have been no assessments. He asked why other species are managed by ACLs but not sharks. Regarding national marine sanctuaries, Tam expressed concerns that fishermen no longer having access and harvest resources is problematic because as ocean people, fishing is part of the heritage and what keeps the tradition and culture going.

### **J. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding ABC control rule, the Council:*

- 1. Recommended, as final action, alternative 2, amending the Hawai'i Archipelago, American Samoa Archipelago, Mariana Archipelago, Pacific Remote Island Areas and Pacific Pelagic FEPs by adding a Tier 6 ABC control rule to the Council's process for specifying ACLs and AMs.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

*Regarding the status of EOs, the Council:*

- 2. Directed staff to send a letter to the president and the USTR requesting to reconvene the Seafood Trade Task Force from the 2020 EO 13921, noting the need to decrease burdens of foreign competition and balance the U.S. seafood trade deficit.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.  
Motion passed.

- 3. Directed staff to send a letter to the USTR requesting that any prohibitions to Chinese-made vessels porting in U.S. ports have exemptions to shipping vessels that may supply U.S. Pacific territories.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

- 4. Directed staff to send a letter to the U.S. State Department and USTR requesting tariffs or restrictions that precisely affect frozen and fresh tuna loins entering the United States that directly compete with U.S. Pacific tuna industries.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

- 5. Directed staff to send a letter to the U.S. State Department and DOC requesting a presentation at the September 2025 Council meeting on the status of implementing the foreign seafood import ban under the MMPA by January 2026, including a summary of the comparability findings scheduled to be issued by Sept. 1, 2025.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.  
Motion passed.

- 6. Directed staff to send a letter to the administration communicating its concerns with the ESA, including the proposed critical habitat designations (coral and green sea turtle), proposed listings (giant clams), other ESA actions (oceanic whitetip shark take prohibition) and recognition of indigenous cultural harvest of green sea turtles, and requesting a review of these issues in light of the administration's priorities and EOs.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.  
Motion passed.

- 7. Requested NMFS PIRO work with Council staff to determine how best to address the EO 14192 regarding deregulation to determine which regulations could be eliminated with the implementation of upcoming Council actions for review by the Council at its next meeting.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.  
Motion passed.

*Regarding shark depredation in U.S. Pacific Island fisheries, the Council:*

- 8. Directed staff to write a letter to the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology Shark Lab requesting an update to the Council on the Shark Deterrent Research Program and information on how to best address shark depredation mitigation to inform the Council's IRA projects on community engagement, regulatory review, scenario planning and protected species.**

Moved by Igisomar; seconded by Itibus.  
Motion passed.

*Regarding the SSC report, the Council:*

- 9. Endorsed the SSC special projects list for the remainder of 2025.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

## **X. Mariana Archipelago**

### **A. Guam**

#### **1. Isla Informe**

Guthertz said the concerns and list of mitigation requests developed by the Council's Military Buildup Working Group convened under the Council's recommendation was presented to the Civilian-Military Coordination Council (CMCC). The CMCC included the Guam governor, Admiral Gregory Huffman, Commander of the Joint Task Force Micronesia, and senior military officials from the various branches and representatives from the Guam government. The working group also met with Randall Sablan, Joint Region Marianas senior policy advisor, to discuss the fishery impact mitigation list prepared by the group shortly after the CMCC meeting. At that meeting, there was agreement on several points, including improving access to fishing grounds around Guam, seeking military assistance with FAD deployment and reaffirming a 2009 DOD commitment to the people of Guam that the military buildup would serve both military and civilian interests. There was also a change from the term buildup to expansion due to the completion of the buildup and the subsequent expansion over the last two years to include the CNMI. Expansion is also moving into the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The military now also prefers the term "opportunities" rather than "mitigation," as it believes the latter implies a negative impact on communities. Once expansion occurs, it will include the Missile Defense Agency and when National Environmental Policy Act activities are done, there will be no mitigation possible. The expansion closes off Guam's northern waters up to three-fourths, 39 weeks, of the year.

It is necessary to know what the firing range schedule is so that fishers know when they can be in the area. It is also necessary to look at the Defense Authorization Act as a potential funding source for expansion mitigation opportunities. Some 700 to 800 U.S. Army personnel are expected to come to Guam, along with their dependents and new arrivals may be bringing boats and will use the marinas where there is no more space. Partnerships must be developed

with the military's Morale, Welfare and Recreation for the Air Force and Navy, in order to arrange assistance for port and marina expansion and other needs. The working group is developing a letter for the governor's signature to articulate opportunities, including annual marine events such as derbies, emergency and rescue concerns, and the fishing schedule of the military of when to access the waters for fishing.

Perez reported the military working group was given a tour of the marinas hosted by the Port Authority of Guam. Opportunities to enhance the facilities were looked at, including adding more floating slips, channel dredging, restoring some concrete platforms near boat launch ramps to accommodate both commercial and recreational vessels. For many years, Agat Marina has gotten shallow, especially during the tide change. The platform was an essential site for vessel fueling and pump out services, and had a winch for use during fishing tournaments. Port staff members noted they are working with the legislature to extend the current lease term from five years to a longer term for the Marinas Yacht Club. This will help foster stability and investment in the marine industry and support infrastructure development. The group also visited the Harbor of Refuge where the port plans to construct a new boat launch ramp. At the Atlantis Marina, the group toured the current vessel docking space, examined the vessel rail launch and recovery ramp. At the Agaña Marina, the slips are at capacity. Dredging on the inner marina is needed due to runoff from Marine Corps Drive. The port will revisit their 2023 Master Plan for potential revisions and expansions of facilities, including slips and tie-up areas.

There was an effort to rebuild the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association (GFCA) facility after the devastation from Typhoon Mawar in 2023, but it is now at a standstill. Construction was delayed indefinitely with no confirmed timeline for restarting or completing the project. In the meantime, a temporary container facility is being used for sales. Those who had marketed their catch at the GFCA shifted to direct sales to hotels and restaurants or to selling by the roadside or at flea markets. Many also use social media. This makes it difficult to have access to fresh fish. Fishers are getting top dollar from direct sources so it is a challenge for GFCA. The young fishers have not had the opportunity to sell their catch through the GFCA and that impacts the trusted commercial data. He said James' Tackle, a long-standing business in Guam, closed due to the dollar-yen exchange rate disparity. A new tackle shop opened in its place but at a different location, undercutting the other store's prices selling top-of-the-line Chinese-made products. A local surf shop also closed its doors after a 40-year run. These closures demonstrate Guam's economic challenges.

Weaver said the firing range on the north end of Guam concerns him because of all the fishing derbies and it presents an economic issue, particularly with those coming to Guam from the CNMI to join.

Guthertz said all the island areas are welcomed to join the working group because the military expansion is going beyond Guam. American Samoa would do well to participate as there may be some interest there by the military to expand. In Hawai'i, it is the center of the Indo-Pacific Command. All information will be shared with the island areas and she said she hopes there is a way to impact the decision-making.

Soliai asked if the GFCA is fully closed.

Perez said no. Shipping containers were put together as a makeshift building. The impact of COVID-19 and the typhoon has shifted the market. Due to the damage at the GFCA, it took



some time to get the temporary facility built. In the meantime, fishermen have found other avenues to sell their catch.

Soliai said this opens the door for others to come.

Perez said fishers had to get rid of their catch and the best option was going directly to the market. This started a different relationship with hotels and restaurants, while ideally, it would have been better with the GFCA.

## **2. Department of Agriculture/Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources Report**

Muña provided a report to the Council on DAWR's activities including an update to the shore-based creel surveys. Top methods were hook and line then cast net from the 82 fishers surveyed. Top species caught were *tataga* (unicorn fish) and *ti'ao* (juvenile goatfish). All 30 boat-based surveys were completed with the top species caught being skipjack at 85 mt and blue marlin at 16 mt. The top method in the survey was trolling. Six FADs were online and nine were offline with work continuing to secure a vendor to fabricate anchors. The FADs include an echosounder attached that provides fishers with access to a website that provides information about biomass around the FAD. There are also 15 shallow-water mooring buoys with 15 more to be procured during this fiscal year.

DAWR is working with the port on the architectural and engineering design and permitting requirements for future construction of a docking gangway for transient vessels this fiscal year. Effort also continues on work requests for the Merizo Pier and Boat Ramp Project. DAWR is also working with the Department of Public Works to have the Paseo Fishing Platform condemned due to missing railings. Funding is being used to replace the fiberglass railings with stainless steel and a gate will also be installed to allow access to the rocks below.

Outreach has included school presentations at the University of Guam Charter Day and a fishing workshop with foster children from Harvest House. Participants were taught how to cast lines and were provided tackle boxes, rods and reels from the Greg Perez Foundation. A Division of Aquaculture chief has also been hired and is working to reestablish the Guam Aquaculture Growers Association. The chief is working with potential business owners to set up mangrove crab farming projects and on a symposium for the Guam aquaculture industry.

Simonds said things are going great in Guam with the return of the aquaculture because the Council had worked on this over the last 20 years with rabbitfish. There was also an aquaculture summit in the CNMI 15 years ago.

Muña said the rabbitfish is the first thing the agency is working on.

Igisomar said he wanted to know if there is collaboration with the NMC who is, by law, the CNMI authority on aquaculture.

Muña said the DAWR aquaculture chief was recruited from the NMC.

## **3. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's Guam Offshore Wind Call for Information**

No report or presentation.

## **B. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands**

### **1. Arongol Falú**

Weaver reported on both positive and negative developments affecting the region. On the challenging side, fuel prices across the CNMI remain high, with gasoline prices around \$6 per gallon on Saipan, more than \$7 on Tinian and slightly above \$6 on Rota. Diesel prices are also elevated, with Saipan at \$5.38, Tinian at \$7.48 and Rota nearing \$9.92 per gallon. These prices continue to pose significant challenges for local fishers. In more encouraging news, the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority is undertaking a feasibility study to assess the potential for inter-island ferry services. This effort is part of a broader initiative to develop a comprehensive transportation master plan for the Northern Mariana Islands. The project is expected to enhance inter-island connectivity, improve transportation infrastructure and support economic development across the region.

Earlier in the year, PIFSC, in collaboration with the CNMI DFW, held a well-attended community event featuring informative presentations about various data surveys conducted in the area, along with updates on a mandatory data implementation plan. There was also strong participation from the AP, the Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC), and the community during the Council's IRA meetings. Weaver emphasized that the event helped build support from local fishermen and expressed optimism for even greater participation in future meetings. Another significant event was the all-women's bottomfishing workshop hosted by Lino Tenorio and Associates, with Lino, an AP member, and his wife serving as instructors. The workshop aimed to empower women in the male-dominated field of bottomfishing by providing hands-on training and creating a supportive learning environment. Eighteen participants took part in the workshop, which combined theoretical instruction with practical sessions at sea and covered a range of techniques and specialized equipment used in deep-sea bottomfishing.

The 6th Annual Wahoo in the Marianas fishing derby, a high school student-led event organized by the nonprofit Tasi to Table, had 28 boats participating—all of which returned safely—making the event a success. Winning catches included a first-place wahoo weighing 38.8 pounds, a second-place fish at 33 pounds and a third-place entry at 32.8 pounds. An additional “total weight” category, which combined the weight of three non-placing wahoos, reached 85.1 pounds. Clark Gallardo, a high school senior from Kailua and founder of CK Lures, who learned about the event through social media, donated four custom lures as prizes. This act of generosity highlighted the reach and impact of Tasi to Table's community-driven approach.

Igisomar said the women's bottomfish workshop event was held in honor of Women's Month and that the boat used was purchased through the Sustainable Fisheries Fund (SFF). He said many of the workshop's fishing tools and gears were also funded through SFF and he looked forward to more public-private partnerships to help expand such educational efforts.

Itibus provided an overview of recent developments affecting the CNMI. One major update was the announcement of the upcoming closure of the Duty Free Shoppers (DFS) Galleria, a long-standing and significant business on Saipan. The closure, set to take effect April 30, 2025, was attributed to ongoing economic challenges and a global restructuring strategy. DFS has been a key tourist destination in the CNMI for many years, and its departure is expected to have a substantial impact on the local economy. Despite these challenges, South Korea continues to be an important tourism market for the CNMI. E-land, a South Korean company, recently hosted members of the Korean media in the Northern Mariana Islands to promote the

region's attractions and strengthen tourism ties between the CNMI and South Korea. The Marianas Visitors Authority reported a significant drop in visitor arrivals in early 2025. In January, the combined arrivals to Saipan, Tinian and Rota was 17,744, marking a 26% decline compared to the 23,840 visitors recorded in January 2024. In response to the ongoing struggles facing the tourism sector, Congresswoman Kimberlyn King-Hinds echoed Governor Arnold Palacios's request for federal assistance and emphasized the need for improved infrastructure and targeted marketing efforts to help revitalize the industry.

Tourism remains a cornerstone of the CNMI economy, providing critical employment opportunities and supporting many local businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted tourism in the region, leading to a sharp economic downturn and declining visitor numbers. A strong tourism industry increases demand for local seafood, which directly benefits fishermen and associated industries. Integrating fisheries into tourism, through activities such as fishing tours and seafood festivals, could enrich the visitor experience while celebrating the CNMI's cultural heritage. Historically, the commercial fishing industry thrived alongside a flourishing tourism sector. By improving air travel access, investing in infrastructure and strengthening marketing efforts, CNMI leaders hope to create a more resilient and dynamic economy.

## **2. Department of Lands and Natural Resources/Division of Fish and Wildlife Report**

Tenorio, DFW, presented the agency report covering activities and updates across several key programs for the fourth quarter of 2024 and the first quarter of 2025. During the fourth quarter, four boat-based creel surveys were completed, observing five fishing trips and conducting four interviews. Due to funding limitations, no surveys were conducted during the first quarter of 2025. In the fourth quarter, 257 commercial purchase reports were collected. Of these, 27 came from buyers—154 were initial sales and 103 were resales. Only seven reports were collected in the first quarter due to funding issues. Temporary funding was later secured to resume sampling efforts, and full operations have now resumed following the release of additional funding.

Ongoing maintenance and repair work is being carried out on program equipment and facilities. Improvements included the replacement of office lighting, enhancements to the rainwater collection system and plumbing repairs. A contract was finalized to acquire a support vessel for in-water research activities, with delivery expected by September 2025. He also said staff received training in CPR, first aid and coral restoration, and participated in underwater visual survey calibration and stock assessment training in partnership with PIFSC. Additionally, three new biologists were hired within the past six months to build program capacity. Their onboarding is expected to enhance operations in the coming months.

During the fourth quarter, the Marine Resource Assessment Program surveyed 94% of scheduled sites in the Saipan Northern Lagoon, completing 139 out of 148 survey points. A technical report titled Mapping Fish Biomass Abundance and Diversity in Saipan's Lagoon is in development based on the survey data. Calibration training and site selection planning were conducted in the first quarter in preparation for the upcoming survey season. Staff also continued analyzing data collected in previous years. In the fourth quarter, buoy and upper rigging were replaced on FAD GG, currently the only operational FAD. A smart buoy is being installed on it, and a contract is in place to deploy new systems on FAD sites KK and JJ. Deployment for these systems is scheduled imminently. Additional FAD deployment plans are underway for the island

of Rota. An invitation to bid is being processed, with expectations of receiving bids within two months. The rigging system for the smart buoy has been completed, and the team is working on acquiring data services to support it.

Enforcement patrols were carried out at MPA sites, known fishing locations and turtle nesting areas. Staff responded to incident reports and conducted investigations into possible fishing violations. Outreach and interviews were conducted with roadside vendors. The enforcement team also provided support to the CNMI DLNR Turtle Program during green sea turtle nesting activity. Procurement of equipment and repair services to support enforcement activities is ongoing. The boating access program manager conducted an onsite damage assessment at the Tinian Marina in coordination with FEMA. Regular maintenance continues at the boat launch and marina facilities, including new signage and parking stall markings. The contract for marina rehabilitation is finalized and awaiting a notice to proceed.

Progress continues on the Rota West Harbor Marina Rehabilitation Project. The program manager is working to obtain a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit. A Division of Coastal Resources Management conditional permit was issued in April, and the program is finalizing a waiver for water quality certification from the Department of Environmental Quality. Ground maintenance services are ongoing, and repairs to the damaged dock were completed in March. Repair work on the Smiling Cove Marina embankment is approximately 90% complete. A technical assessment of the Smiling Cove Marina ramp is underway to address slope issues and improve accessibility for boaters. The program also finalized a U.S. Army Corps nationwide permit for maintenance activities at Sugar Dock and other ramps. Dredging and maintenance of the Sugar Dock ramp have been completed, and a technical assessment is being conducted on the DFW ramp to assess structural integrity due to undercutting concerns.

Morning and night surveys of turtle nesting beaches continue on schedule by the CNMI Sea Turtle program. In 2024, 27 green sea turtle nests were identified, of which 18 were inventoried. Ten nests were lost due to wave action and predation by monitor lizards. The Sea Turtle Program also conducted 18 outreach events, reaching more than 1,200 individuals. Three turtle strandings were documented. On Nov. 26, 2024, a green sea turtle was accidentally hooked by a fisherman at Smiling Cove Marina. Staff removed the hook, but the turtle escaped before a full assessment could be completed. All gear was successfully retrieved. On Jan. 13, 2025, a deceased green sea turtle was found at the Saipan seaport. No external injuries were observed, and the cause of death remains unknown. Necropsy samples were sent to NOAA PIFSC for analysis. On Feb. 5, 2025, a turtle behaving erratically near Crowne Plaza Beach was recovered with a superficial carapace injury. The turtle responded well to handling, was tagged and was released. The injury is believed to be caused by a bow strike or spear.

### **3. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Bottomfish Assessment Terms of Reference**

Felipe Carvalho, PIFSC FRMD, presented the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the 2025 Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review (WPSAR) of the CNMI BMUS Stock Assessment Update. The TOR will guide the upcoming WPSAR process in April 2025 which aims to ensure clear assessment guidelines are followed, supporting transparency and scientific integrity throughout the evaluation.

The last stock assessment of CNMI bottomfish occurred in 2019, utilizing data collected between 2000 and 2017. The data sources for the assessment included CNMI boat- and shore-

based creel surveys, along with commercial purchase data. A relative abundance index was developed from boat-based creel surveys and the assessment was conducted using JABBA, a Bayesian biomass assessment model developed by PIFSC. The 2019 benchmark assessment concluded that, as of 2017, the bottomfish stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring. Based on this information, the overfishing limit was set at 95,000 pounds, and the ACL at 80,000 pounds. The upcoming 2025 WPSAR will focus on confirming whether the key elements of the updated assessment remain consistent with those used in the 2019 benchmark. The panel review will address a series of six questions outlined in the TOR including evaluating data sources, CPUE standardization, model consistency, uncertainty documentation, stock status estimation and projection methods. Each question requires a yes or no response and if a response is negative, the panel must provide justification and recommend alternative approaches. In addition to answering the core questions, the panel will propose prioritized recommendations for future benchmark assessments of CNMI bottomfish. These recommendations are intended to improve the accuracy and robustness of future assessments.

## **C. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

### **1. Marianas Advisory Panel**

Dominick San Gil, Guam AP vice chair, presented the Guam AP report and recommendations.

*Regarding Guam fisheries, the Guam AP:*

- Recommends the Council inquire with the USCG on whether Marine Event Plans filed with the Guam Police Department's marine boating safety program are shared with them and what the protocols are for USCG to advise these events in the case of adverse weather.
- Recommends the Council request the Guam Port Authority to include the fishing community in the development of capital improvement plans and to review issues that the fishing community is experiencing with the marinas including, but not limited to, lighting, maintenance of washdowns, security, allocation of dock space, trailer parking and other matters of concern.

Tam presented the CNMI AP report and recommendations on behalf of vice chair Richard Farrell.

*Regarding CNMI military issues, the CNMI AP recommends the Council suggest the governor of CNMI re-engage the DOD to update the analyses on the economic impacts of the pre-positioning ships, conduct updated surveys on the impacts of those ships on the reefs and to provide mitigation for lost fishing opportunities.*

### **2. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee**

There were no FIAC recommendations regarding the Mariana Archipelago.

### **3. Guam and Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee**

Muña presented the Guam REAC report and recommendations.

*The Guam REAC* supports the ongoing work by the Council's Military Working Group and endorses the group substantiating the findings of the group and recommends a Council review prior to submitting it to the governor.

Igisomar presented the CNMI REAC report and recommendations.

*Regarding implementation of the mandatory data reporting*, the REAC recommends the Council request CNMI DFW:

- Collaborate with DOC to enhance outreach efforts to business owners on the data reporting regulations to clarify requirements and promote training opportunities for commercial purchasers and harvesters.
- 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 and Northern Islands) that are landed in Guam.

*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.

*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.

*Regarding the REAC membership*, the REAC recommends the Council invite Talaya Club, I Sanhalom Laguna Anglers (ISLA) Association, 500 Sails, and Matua Council for Native Chamorro Advancement to become members of the CNMI REAC.

#### **4. Scientific and Statistical Committee**

Camacho presented the SSC report and recommendations.

*Regarding the CNMI Bottomfish Stock Assessment Update WPSAR TOR*, the SSC agrees to the TOR for the 2025 CNMI Bottomfish WPSAR. The SSC nominates members Milani Chaloupka (chair), David Itano and Keena Leon Guerrero to the 2025 CNMI Bottomfish WPSAR panel.

#### **D. Public Comment**

There were no requests for public comments.

#### **E. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding the CNMI bottomfish WPSAR, the Council:*

- 1. Endorsed the CNMI bottomfish WPSAR TOR and appoints Keena Leon Guerrero, David Itano, and Milani Chaloupka to serve on the WPSAR panel, with Chaloupka serving as the chair.**

Moved by Solilai; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

*Regarding implementation of mandatory data reporting in CNMI, the Council:*

- 2. Encouraged DLNR to work with the CNMI DOC to enhance outreach efforts to business owners on the data reporting regulations to clarify requirements and promote training opportunities for commercial seafood purchasers and harvesters.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

*Regarding fishery development, the Council:*

- 3. Directed staff to work with CNMI DLNR to explore options for providing flake ice at Garapan Public Market to fishermen as an incentive to participate in the DFW data collection programs.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

*Regarding the PIFSC Marianas Boat Fishing Survey, the Council:*

- 4. Requested NMFS PIFSC better identify, capture and report on fishing effort and landings from the Northern Islands and analyze information to better understand fishing effort and catch occurring in CNMI (Rota and Northern Islands) that are landed in Guam.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

- 5. Directed staff to work with the Guam Port Authority to include the fishing community in the development of capital improvement plans and to review issues that the fishing community is experiencing with the marinas including, but not limited to, lighting, maintenance of washdowns, security, allocation of dock space, trailer parking and other matters of concern.**

Moved by Itibus; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

*Regarding Mariana Archipelago military issues, the Council:*

- 6. Directed staff to work with Council members and the current military working group on developing a report on military issue impacts to fisheries with potential solutions to be presented to the Council at the June 2025 meeting.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

## **XI. American Samoa Archipelago**

### **A. Motu Lipoti**

Sword reported the American Samoa DOC has transitioned its *alia* vessel initiative into a broader Fishing Education and Business Incubation Program. The program originally aimed to build four *alia* vessels, each valued at approximately \$900,000, for training in both longline and bottomfish commercial fishing. The objective is to train the next generation of commercial fishers in American Samoa. There are currently no active under-40-foot *alia* vessels participating in the longline fishery, and no active licenses in that category. There are 10 large longline vessels with Class C and D licenses operating in the territory. Sword said the program is intended to rebuild local capacity and reestablish a functioning small-boat commercial fishery in the territory. The program would include training on boating safety and vessel maintenance, areas that have been a challenge in staffing and sustaining longline operations due to the limited availability of qualified mariners and trained crew. The hope is to recruit and train full crews for the four vessels, who can eventually help supply local demand for fresh fish amid rising food costs.

Sword also said a recent youth outreach effort hosted by the Pago Pago Game Fishing Association (PGFA) and supported by the International Game Fish Association called “Passport to Fishing” taught more than 50 high school students the basics of bottomfishing and trolling, along with knot-tying and boating safety. The USCG Auxiliary participated by delivering safety presentations and several PGFA members volunteered their boats to take participants out on the water.

Sword said a recent two-day PGFA tournament had no wahoo landed, but participants caught yellowfin tuna and large *masimasi* (mahimahi). Favorable weather, which has been rare on weekends, allowed the event to proceed successfully. He said that American Samoa would host the 22nd Steinlager *I’a Lapoa* (Big Fish) Tournament the week after Flag Day (April 17). This event will follow tournaments in Samoa and precede another in Vava’u, Tonga, creating a three-island fishing circuit involving vessels from Samoa, New Zealand and Tonga. Sword described it as a regional gathering of sport fishers and a return to the competitive spirit historically seen between Pacific Island nations.

The president of StarKist recently visited American Samoa and met with the governor. StarKist is investing in facility upgrades, including the potential addition of a pet food production line. The company reaffirmed its commitment to remaining in American Samoa for the coming years, a positive sign for the territory’s economy and fisheries sector. There was a recent visit by a USCG cutter and Sword acknowledged Congresswoman Uifa’atali Amata Radewagen for her advocacy to increase USCG presence in American Samoa. Sword said Amata continues to raise concerns in Congress over the expanding influence of China in the Pacific, particularly in sectors like fisheries and deep-sea mining. He said the strategic implications of recent Chinese activities in the Cook Islands could have downstream effects on the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa.

### **B. American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources Report**

Ochavillo presented the DMWR report covering activities from October to December 2024. He said that throw net fishing was the most productive gear type for the quarter, accounting for 1,160 pounds of catch. The top six nearshore species recorded were *atule*, mullet,



striped surgeonfish, soldierfish, trevally and fringe lip mullet. There was a decrease in total catch volume compared to the previous quarter. For boat-based creel surveys, nine vessels contributed to approximately 2,000 pounds of fish. He said staff conducted 28 interviews from seven fishing trips, identifying gray jobfish, longtail snapper and ambon snapper as the dominant species. No bottomfish sales were documented in vendor receipts. Fishermen have increasingly been selling bottomfish roadside due to stagnant market prices and low purchasing rates from local vendors. He said spearfishing yielded approximately 400 pounds of fish, mainly parrotfish and surgeonfish. Nearshore commercial landings recorded via the invoice system totaled approximately 2,700 pounds, with an estimated value of \$12,300. In pelagic fisheries, three *alia* vessels landed 530 pounds, consisting mostly of skipjack and yellowfin tuna. Vendor receipts reported 30,000 pounds of pelagic fish, including marlin, wahoo, yellowfin tuna and sailfish, with a market value of \$240,000.

DMWR currently has five operational deep-water FADs, the department's target. Satellite buoys provided by Zunibal were installed on FAD A (Aunu'u), FAD B (off the harbor), and FAD C (Vaitogi). DMWR staff is conducting experimental fishing using vertical and longline gear to compare catches against data from the satellite buoys and help refine fish detection models. Under the Key Reef Species Program, DMWR collaborated with Poseidon Fisheries Research to collect gonads and otoliths from five species to support life history studies for future stock assessments. Staff were also trained in spawning potential ratio analysis for size limit management. In November, PIFSC staff provided training in coral demographic survey methods and water quality protocols. Preliminary data indicated a measurable threshold in total suspended solids above which coral benthic composition is affected.

DMWR continues to care for giant clams donated by the Samoa Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and the department is exploring an ecotourism model involving these clams as part of its community-based fisheries management efforts. Staff also participated in a regional legislation training held in Apia, coordinated by the Maritime Affairs Council, the Pacific Community (SPC), and the University of California College of the Law. The training focused on the development of ocean governance frameworks.

The Enforcement Division conducted port inspections on 12 foreign vessels—primarily Taiwanese longliners—and boarded 11 U.S. vessels under the MSA. Staff also documented three dead sea turtles between October and December—two hawksbills and one green turtle. DMWR has also begun retrieving industrial purse seine FADs stranded in American Samoa's waters. With support from SPC, staff is tracking data that indicates 20 to 50 FADs may drift into the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa annually, with approximately 20 washing ashore. DMWR also hosted representatives from the Korea Maritime Institute, which focuses on fisheries economics and policy. Discussions focused on climate change and tuna policy, and the Institute invited DMWR to participate in a regional meeting in Fiji later in 2025. Discussions on the Tuna Policy Project are ongoing with SPC, which has recently hired an economist who plans to visit American Samoa this year to meet with stakeholders, including the cannery and longline industry, to support development of policy responses to economic and operational challenges.

Ramsey asked whether the stranded FADs were primarily private or purse seine FADs.

Ochavillo said they could be a mix of both.

Soliai asked whether DMWR had begun compiling data on stranded FADs.

Ochavillo said that the department participated in a data collection workshop with SPC the previous year and has since started compiling data. DMWR is working with SPC to seek funding for FAD retrieval efforts and hopes to secure larger grants to intercept drifting FADs offshore.

Soliai noted the importance of data collection and requested that DMWR provide a status update on the stranded FAD data project at the next Council meeting.

Soliai also asked for clarification on a slide that appeared to show bigeye tuna recorded in the creel survey.

Ochavillo said that 450 pounds of bigeye tuna were recorded under the pelagic category but clarified that the catch came from foreign longline operations, not local vessels.

Soliai asked whether DMWR was still coordinating with SPC on the Tuna Policy Project.

Ochavillo said DMWR was reviewing existing documents, including a study from 2007, and compiling current information. The SPC's newly hired economist is expected to visit American Samoa in the coming months to meet with cannery officials and discuss issues facing the tuna industry. While formal outreach to the cannery had not yet begun, it was part of the planned engagement.

### **C. Revision to the American Samoa Bottomfish Management Unit Species (Final Action)**

Thomas Remington, Council contractor, provided the presentation on the American Samoa BMUS and said the action represented the culmination of a process that began with initial action in June 2023. He said delays occurred due to overlapping timelines with the American Samoa bottomfish rebuilding plan and the development of species-specific annual total allowable landings. These delays were intentional to ensure the outcomes of those actions could inform the proposed BMUS revision. The original bottomfish FMP was developed in 1986 and included 60 species, with 20 dominating landings. These species were mostly snappers, groupers, jacks and emperors. In 2009, when the FMPs transitioned into FEPs, the American Samoa BMUS list was reduced to 17 species. A subsequent action in 2019—known as the Ecosystem Component Species (ECS) Amendment—further revised the list to 11 species by reclassifying primarily territorial, reef-associated species as ecosystem components.

Following the stock assessment in 2022, which determined that the American Samoa bottomfish stock was overfished and experiencing overfishing, the Council developed and implemented a rebuilding plan. However, it became clear that many of the species in the complex were predominantly harvested in territorial waters, limiting federal jurisdiction and the effectiveness of federal rebuilding measures. This realization led to a reassessment of the species list, with a focus on whether the current BMUS continued to require federal conservation and management. The purpose of the action is to revise the BMUS list in the American Samoa FEP to reflect the current structure of the fishery, and the need is to ensure that the species listed remain appropriate for federal conservation and management, in line with the National Standards under the MSA.

Remington provided the alternatives for Council consideration. Under alternative 1, the no action/status quo alternative the BMUS list would remain unchanged at 11 species.

Management would continue via species-specific ACLs and AMs, and NMFS and the Council would monitor and assess catches. Management would also continue in collaboration with DMWR, and the fishery would operate as it has in recent years. While this approach maintains continuity, it includes species largely harvested from territorial waters, limiting the effectiveness of federal management. Alternative 2 would remove most shallow-water species and add deeper-water species, including additional *Pristipomoides*, one *Etelis* and a *Paracaesio* species occasionally reported by fishers in American Samoa. The species list expansion is informed by creel survey cluster analyses conducted by PIFSC, synthesis of species life histories, expert opinion, and evaluation against the 10 nonexhaustive National Standard 1 criteria. While the total number of BMUS would increase, the composition would better reflect species commonly caught together offshore. Remington said the alternative is administrative in nature and unlikely to change fishing behavior but would enhance management by aligning resources with species occurring predominantly in federal waters. Alternative 3 would pare down the BMUS list from 11 to six species—specifically, those with relatively more data, which allows for full stock assessments by PIFSC. The list includes *Etelis*, *Pristipomoides* and one *Aphareus* species. Remington emphasized that these are not necessarily data-rich species, but are comparatively data-sufficient. The rationale is that listing species in the FEP without sufficient data does not provide meaningful management benefit. Removing less-data-rich species from the BMUS would allow them to be reclassified as ECS, where data collection could be prioritized. If such species become more prominent in the fishery in the future, they could be reconsidered for MUS status. Like alternative 2, this alternative is administrative in nature and not expected to affect fishing practices in the near term, but would enhance the precision and efficiency of federal management.

The proposed action also involves several MSA components beyond changing the species list. These include status determination criteria, ACL mechanisms, designations for EFH and habitat areas of particular concern, data monitoring systems for target and bycatch species, and assessments of impacts to human communities. He said while some components—such as rate-based ACLs—are being considered under a separate omnibus amendment, working groups were convened to address all relevant MSA requirements for the BMUS revision. The results of those groups were reviewed by the Council’s plan teams and the SSC. He said alternative 1 may carry slight negative impacts by retaining species that federal managers cannot effectively oversee. Alternatives 2 and 3 are expected to result in slight positive impacts by enabling more targeted, efficient management. Sword asked whether ACLs were included.

Remington said they were not listed in the slides and said ACLs would not directly change under this action but would require follow-up to ensure coverage for newly listed species, such as *Etelis boweni*, which may need to be managed via an indicator.

Soliai asked whether the ACLs differed across alternatives.

Remington said that ACLs would not be altered by this action but that newly added species would either need new ACLs or be managed under indicators until future stock assessments could inform specific values.

Yamada provided additional clarification, stating that there are currently nine ACLs associated with the BMUS under alternative 1, ranging from 1,500 to 16,000 pounds. Under alternative 2, new ACLs would be needed for *Etelis boweni*, while *E. carbunculus* and *E. coruscans* are currently covered under a shared indicator. He noted that some of the ACL logistics would be better addressed when the Council takes action on the item the following day.

Soliai said the Council would revisit the ACL details and proceed with the action item the next day.

## **D. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations**

### **1. American Samoa Advisory Panel**

Ilaoa presented the AP report and recommendations. He said the AP was enthusiastic about the use of an upgraded version of Catchit Logit and noted the need to target outreach to younger generations.

*Regarding American Samoa bottomfish*, the American Samoa AP recommended the Council take final action on alternative 3 to revise the BMUS list to six species of deep snappers with species that have data for stock assessments.

### **2. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee**

There were no FIAC recommendations regarding the American Samoa Archipelago.

### **3. Joint Plan Team**

Sabater presented the joint Plan Team report and recommendations. He said there was extensive discussion on the American Samoa BMUS revision during its intercessional meeting in January. The Plan Team discussed the implications for ACLs under each alternative and that there is a requirement to move away from ACL complexes to species-specific ACLs.

*Regarding American Samoa BMUS*, the Plan Team recommended the Council change its preferred alternative and select alternative 3 instead. The Plan Team was concerned that the fishery is small, and management would require additional data that is not available. Alternative 3 would be compatible with the current scale of the fishery. Alternative 3 would also provide time for the Council and NMFS to work on improving data and when the data are available for management, elevate species to the MUS list.

### **4. Scientific and Statistical Committee**

There were no SSC recommendations regarding the American Samoa Archipelago.

### **5. Program Planning Standing Committee**

There were no Program Planning Standing Committee recommendations regarding the American Samoa Archipelago.

## **E. Public Comment**

There were no requests for public comments.

## **F. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding American Samoa bottomfish, the Council:*

- 1. Recommended, as final action, alternative 3 to amend the American Samoa Archipelago FEP to revise the BMUS list to the following six species of deep snappers that have data for stock assessments:**

Scientific Name	Common Name(s)	Local Name(s)
<i>Aphareus rutilans</i>	Red snapper, silvermouth, lehi	<i>Palu-gutusaliva</i>
<i>Etelis boweni</i>	Red snapper, giant ehu	-
<i>Etelis carbunculus</i>	Red snapper, ehu	<i>Palu-malau</i>
<i>Etelis coruscans</i>	Red snapper, onaga	<i>Palu-loa</i>
<i>Pristipomoides flavipinnis</i>	Yelloweye snapper	<i>Palu-sina</i>
<i>Pristipomoides zonatus</i>	Flower snapper, gindai	<i>Palu-ula, palu-sega</i>

Additionally, the following species would be removed from the existing BMUS list and classified as ECS:

Scientific Name	Common Name(s)	Local Name(s)
<i>Lethrinus rubrioperculatus</i>	Redgill emperor	<i>Filua-paumumu</i>
<i>Lutjanus kasmira</i>	Blueline snapper	<i>Savane</i>
<i>Aprion virescens</i>	Gray snapper, uku	<i>Asoama</i>
<i>Caranx lugubris</i>	Black jack	<i>Tafauli</i>
<i>Pristipomoides argyrogrammicus</i>	Blue-banded gindai, jobfish	<i>Palu-tusimoana</i>
<i>Pristipomoides filamentosus</i>	Pink snapper, paka	<i>Palu-'ena'ena</i>
<i>Variola louti</i>	Lunartail/lyretail grouper	<i>Velo</i>

Further, the Council deems that the regulations implementing the recommendations are necessary or appropriate in accordance with Section 303(c) of the MSA. In doing so, the Council directs Council staff to work with NMFS to complete regulatory language to implement the Council's final action. Unless otherwise explicitly directed by the Council, the Council authorizes the Executive Director and the Chairman to review the draft regulations to verify that they are consistent with the Council action before submitting them, along with this determination, to the Secretary on behalf of the Council. The Executive Director and the Chairman are authorized to withhold submission of the Council action and/or proposed regulations and take the action back to the Council if, in their determination, the proposed regulations are not consistent with the Council action.

Soliai reflected on the significance of the action, noting the long journey since the 2019 determination that the stock was overfished. He acknowledged the progress made and thanked those who contributed to the effort. Soliai added that while this was a final action for the current issue, the next stock assessment is scheduled for 2027.

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

*Regarding environmental impacts on fisheries, the Council:*

- 2. Requested an update from DMWR and American Samoa Environmental Protection Agency on their review of the cannery ocean disposal site and impacts on local fisheries, including an increase in shark depredation.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.  
Motion passed.

## **XII. Administrative Matters**

### **A. Financial Reports**

Randy Holmen, Council staff, referred members to the financial documents in their briefing materials and provided updates on the total expenditures in the following open awards:

- \$396,988 in the Administrative Multi-Year Award, ending December 2028. \$3,617,513 committed funds remaining;
- \$174,622 in the 2023 Coral Reef Award, ending September 2025. \$80,377 committed funds remaining;
- \$55,428 in the 2024 Coral Reef Award, ending September 2025. \$205,035 committed funds remaining;
- \$50,017 in the IRA (Initial) Award, ending December 2027. \$324,982 committed funds remaining;
- No expenditures in the IRA (Priorities 0-4) Award, ending December 2027. \$2,358,262 committed funds remaining;
- \$77,124 in the SFF XII Award, ending July 2025. \$254,437 committed funds remaining for CNMI and \$177,312 for American Samoa. The Council will request to extend this award to July 2027;
- \$101,075 in the SFF XIII Award, ending July 2025. \$201,613 committed funds remaining for CNMI and \$202,687 committed funds remaining for American Samoa. The Council will request to extend this award to July 2027;
- \$44,389 in the 2022 American Samoa SFF Award, ending July 2025; \$55,610 committed funds remaining;
- \$20,069 in the 2023 American Samoa SFF Award, ending September 2026; \$374,454 committed funds remaining;

- No expenditures to date in the 2024 American Samoa SFF Award, ending July 2027. \$353,625 committed funds remaining;
- \$12,848 in the 2022 CNMI SFF Award, ending July 2025. \$359,706 committed funds remaining. The Council has submitted a request to extend this award to July 2027;
- No expenditures to date in the 2024 CNMI SFF Award, ending July 2027. \$748,155 committed funds remaining;
- \$57,124 in the SFF Pacific Remote Island Areas Award, ending July 2025. \$34,022 committed funds remaining. The Council will request to extend this award to July 2027.

Simonds reminded the Council that it has been operating under a deficit for several years due to reduced funding, particularly from NMFS. The Council did not receive its usual financial support from NMFS, including a cut in contributions to the joint scholarship program, which had previously been supported with \$50,000 each from PIFSC and PIRO. To cover the shortfall, the Council, along with American Samoa and the CNMI, allocated additional funds from their SFF budgets. In response to the financial strain, the Council made broad reductions, including cuts to travel, compensation, education and outreach, supplies and Hawai‘i liaison funds. Overall, the budget was reduced by \$251,000.

Soliai echoed concerns about the loss of scholarship funding, emphasizing its critical role in building capacity within U.S. Pacific territories. He noted that funding from HLA is no longer available and stressed that the lack of local capacity has stalled many important projects.

Sword expressed disappointment over the loss of scholarship funding, stating that the federal government bears responsibility and should step up to restore the support.

Guthertz voiced support for the Council’s scholarship program, highlighting its vital role in educating Pacific Island students and strengthening local governments. She emphasized the program’s positive impact on both the university and the broader region, calling it a cost-effective investment with long-term benefits. Guthertz urged continued support from federal agencies and proposed that all four jurisdictions draft a joint letter requesting the restoration of scholarship funding to support fisheries and related fields across the Pacific Islands.

Simonds stated that the Council faces greater funding challenges than other regions and supported sending a letter to the administration requesting continued funding. She noted that while the Council is currently operating at level funding, budget cuts may still occur. Simonds pointed out that regional fishery management council budgets have remained flat for years and proposed increases have been minimal compared to other programs like Sea Grant. She emphasized the need to advocate for increased funding.

Sword noted that budget cuts have prevented the next meeting from being held in American Samoa, limiting community participation and feedback. Sword emphasized that holding meetings in the territories allows local residents to engage directly with the Council process, which aligns with the community-based intent of the MSA. He urged the agency to reconsider its budgeting decisions to support regional engagement.

Simonds stated that starting next fiscal year, the Council will need to compete for coral funding that has previously supported staff positions, including one held for decades. She noted

that this change affects four councils and could require the Council to absorb those costs if the funding is not secured. She emphasized the need to address this shift and find solutions to maintain staffing.

Muña asked for clarification about Sea Grant funding.

Simonds said the Sea Grant funding is \$80 million for the last couple of years and they received a \$4 million increase two years ago, whereas the councils have been level-funded at \$30 million. She said there has not been a good case made about the downstream effects that the regional fishery management councils have on the people involved in fishing and their livelihoods.

Muña said it would be an opportune time to make that argument to the administration, noting the priorities for making America competitive internationally while supporting American livelihoods in the process.

Malloy said the Council did receive a fairly big slug of money through the IRA grant, while PIRO got no money out of the IRA grant. PIRO is thus supporting the Council through the base funding as it did not receive any additional funding to support the councils on the IRA projects. She said the IRA is a source of funding that could be used for any number of capacity-building projects in the territories, and PIRO welcomes suggestions about reprogramming those grant funds toward other purposes. Malloy said she supports capacity building in the territories, but wanted to set the expectations that the agency is anticipating a historic budget cut that is likely to affect both money it can give out as well as the number of staff. All of the signals suggest that the budget cut is going to affect NMFS as dramatically as many other parts of the federal government.

Sword said any time American Samoa is not represented in the statistics properly, that signals to Congress that American Samoa is of no value.

Simonds said more reports like those presented by Hospital the previous day are needed and more frequently. Regarding IRA, she said the Pacific Islands region did not get its fair share of the money for protected species and should have gotten something for false killer whales.

## **B. Administrative Reports**

Elle Granger, staff, reported no changes in staffing since the 201st Council meeting and noted operational upgrades to office equipment and service contracts.

## **C. Council Family Changes**

Mitsuyasu referred members to their briefing materials outlining proposed changes to several advisory bodies. Tom Oliver has retired from NMFS PIFSC and will be replaced on the Archipelagic Plan Team. Dean Sensui has resigned from the Non-Commercial Fisheries Advisory Committee and Alexander Min is proposed as his replacement. Celeste Hanley is recommended to replace Scott Bloom on the Education Committee as the PIRO representative.

Yamada reported the solicitation for alternate positions on the Hawai‘i, Guam and CNMI APs closed Feb. 28, 2025. Eleven applicants were received: six for Guam, four for the CNMI and one for Hawai‘i.



#### **D. Standard Operating Procedures and Policies Changes**

There were no Standard Operating Procedures and Policies changes.

#### **E. Meetings and Workshops**

Simonds referred members to their briefing materials, noting that travel will be limited. The upcoming SSC meeting is scheduled for June 4-6, followed by the Council meeting from June 9-11, both which will be held in Hawai'i instead of American Samoa. The September meeting is also scheduled to take place in Hawai'i, while the December meeting will be held virtually. Simonds cautioned that additional budget cuts could result in more meetings being shifted to a virtual format, although the MSA requires at least two in-person meetings annually.

Guthertz proposed formalizing the Military Buildup Committee as a standing committee of the Council. She noted the growing importance of this topic, especially in Guam and the CNMI, due to the Indo-Pacific initiative and related military expansions such as the missile defense system. In Guam, some residents have received relocation notices during testing periods, which has caused concern among landowners and could have implications for surrounding marine areas.

Simonds asked interested members to notify Council staff during the break so that the committee membership could be finalized.

Igisomar expressed support for the new committee and emphasized that the CNMI has maintained regular and constructive communication with the DOD and has been given opportunities to provide feedback on all those interactions.

#### **F. Executive and Budget Standing Committee Report**

Sword reported the Executive and Budget Standing Committee met to review financial and administrative reports. This included updates on the IRA Program, which highlights two regional community meeting initiatives and a pilot project for technical fishery training. Council Member Ongoing Development meetings were also held to improve the Council process. Additional discussions included food traceability requirements, Council family changes and preparations for the upcoming Council Coordination Committee (CCC) meeting. The Committee also reviewed recent EOs, especially the one requiring the elimination of 10 regulations for every new one added, as well as standing committee assignments and developments regarding marine sanctuaries. Sword noted that some of these changes could significantly impact American Samoa.

Simonds added that the agenda for the upcoming CCC meeting in New England is available. The meeting will include round robins where each Council reports on its biggest issues and successes. A video and possible publications are being prepared to commemorate the councils' 50th anniversary. International affairs will also be addressed at the meeting.

Soliai raised concerns about EO 14169 and its potential impact on U.S. foreign aid, specifically the \$60 million annual that supports the South Pacific Tuna Treaty and access for the U.S. flagged purse seiner vessels based in American Samoa.

Fitchett confirmed that the U.S. State Department acknowledged the aid is under review and paused in line with the EO's guidance. Secretary Marco Rubio has initiated a review of all

foreign aid to ensure alignment with the “America First” policy, requiring justification that spending makes America safer, stronger and more prosperous.

Simonds requested follow-up with the U.S. State Department on the status of other aid commitments. She also reported leadership changes, noting that Andrew Lawler, formerly a commissioner under the Trump Administration, is back as deputy assistant secretary for International Fisheries. He will be the lead for the WCPFC, while Juan Caro handles broader international affairs. Lawler is expected to meet with Council members virtually next week.

Soliai emphasized the need to ask the Departments of State and the Interior how long the foreign aid pause will last. He proposed the Council recommend that staff work with NFMS and the U.S. State Department to evaluate the impacts of the pause on the South Pacific Tuna Treaty. The aid is vital for maintaining fishing access in Pacific EEZs, which supports the American Samoa based purse seine fleet and tuna supply for the local cannery. Soliai stressed the need to balance national policy with the specific needs of island territories like American Samoa.

### **G. Public Comment**

Rep. Trude Ledoux-Sunia addressed the Council on behalf of the American Samoa *Fono*, specifically the House Committee for Marine and Wildlife Resources. Accompanied by Rep. Va’asa Simaru, she stated they traveled from American Samoa to express strong support for the Council and to reinforce its efforts in fisheries management. She praised the Council and its members for their continuous dedication to protecting ocean resources and supporting economic stability. Ledoux-Sunia shared personal reflections of fisheries issues and expressed deep concern over the loss of scholarship funding linked to Council programs, emphasizing that these scholarships have been instrumental in education and empowering the next generation of fisheries advocates, not just in American Samoa, but across the Pacific region. She stressed that eliminating these education opportunities would be a significant setback to building future leadership in fisheries management.

Ilaoa expressed strong support for Rep. Ledoux-Sunia’s comments, emphasizing the urgent need for funding, particularly for education and outreach. Ilaoa relayed messages from the AP members who echoed the same concerns. He highlighted the disproportionate burden placed on Pacific Islands, noting they are responsible for 99% of marine monuments and related conservation efforts. Ilaoa stressed that unlike the U.S. states, American Samoa lacks access to state funding for education, making external support critical to sustain educational and outreach initiatives tied to fisheries and marine resource management.

### **H. Council Discussion and Action**

*Regarding administrative matters, the Council:*

- 1. Accepted the 202nd Council meeting financial and administrative reports.**

*Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.*  
*Motion passed.*

*Regarding Council family changes, the Council:*

- 2. Appointed Celeste Hanley as the NMFS PIRO representative to replace Scott Bloom on the Education Committee.**

3. **Directed staff to invite as members, a representative of the Talaya Club and ISLA Association to the CNMI REAC.**
4. **Regarding the AP,**
  - a. **Appointed as alternates, Dre Lizama and Lorna Iginoef-Ogumoro to the CNMI AP;**
  - b. **Appoints as an alternate, W. Kaleo Crivello to the Hawai'i AP; and**
  - c. **Appoints as an alternate, Audrey Toves to the Guam AP.**
5. **Removed Dean Sensui from the Non-Commercial Fishery Advisory Committee, and replaced him with Alexander Min.**
6. **Directed staff to invite proposed members of the Council's Indigenous Committee for approval at the next meeting in June.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

*Regarding Council family changes, the Council:*

7. **Approved the standing committees' membership as presented.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

*Regarding funding, the Council:*

8. **Directed staff to send a letter convey the Council's continuing funding shortfall to the DOC, CCC Budget Committee and NMFS Headquarters, urging DOC to work with NOAA/NMFS and Office of Management and Budget to increase funding to the regional fishery management councils.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

*Regarding EOs and Pacific Island fisheries, the Council:*

9. **Directed staff to work with DOC, Department of State and Department of the Interior to analyze potential impacts of EO 14169, Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, on the U.S. obligations to existing tuna treaties and other Pacific fishery arrangements to be presented at its June 2025 meeting.**

Soliai inquired why the Department of the Interior is included in the recommendation.

Fitchett replied that there are funds pledged in conjunction to the Compacts of Free Association, which goes through Department of the Interior.

Soliai requested to make a statement regarding this recommendation and expressed concern over the recent EO directing a reevaluation of U.S. foreign aid, highlighting its potential negative impact on American Samoa, particularly regarding the South Pacific Tuna Treaty and U.S. purse seine fleet. Soliai noted that while national interest is important, U.S. territories often suffer unintended consequences. Disruption of aid to Pacific Island nations could jeopardize access to key fishing grounds, harming American Samoa's tuna industry, which is vital to its

economy. He urged the U.S. government to expedite its review and remove funding restrictions to maintain regional stability and support American Samoa's economic and fisheries interest. He also called on the Council to work closely with federal agencies to advocate for a swift resolution.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

*Regarding national marine sanctuaries, the Council:*

- 10. Directed staff to send a letter to the secretary of commerce seeking clarification on the Council's proposed fishing regulations and consistency with the administration's policies and EOs to inform the Council's decision to reconsider those recommendations.**

Sakoda requested that the State of Hawai'i have the opportunity to review the letter before it is sent.

Ramsey expressed full support for this recommendation and noted that all members should be fully informed with the most up-to-date information before a decision is made.

Sword expressed frustration that sanctuaries have refused to present at recent Council meetings despite requests. He emphasized the importance of informing the secretary of commerce about regional issues, especially the area's reliance on three key fisheries. Sword stressed the need for compromise with sanctuaries for national benefit.

Soliai added that the recommendation aligns with the EO from President Trump involving the secretary in decision making. He supported the idea of escalating the issue to potentially speed up the process and gather feedback.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

### **XIII. Other Business**

Asuka Ishizaki reported on an ongoing review of regulations pursuant to EO 14192, which mandates that any new regulation be offset by repealing at least 10 existing ones. Guidance for implementation is still pending. The order broadly defines "regulation," covering various agency documents beyond formal rules. Council staff is reviewing ongoing and existing regulations to prepare for compliance. Staff have listed current Council actions and potential regulations for repeal. Some regulations may be outdated or unnecessary, such as the swordfish retention limit or blue-dyed bait requirement. Staff is also reviewing non-MSA regulations that may count toward the 10-for-1 requirement, including those under the MMPA and ESA. Work is ongoing to assess all relevant regulations and identify potential candidates for removal.

Muña requested assistance drafting letters relevant to regulations proposed that are specific to Guam.

Ramsey inquired if this EO will result in more lawsuits and challenges.

Simonds said this is the beginning of a broader discussion. The Council should review and identify relevant regulations, including older ones that some current members were not present for when they were established. Some mitigation measures from lawsuits related to past regulations may now be unnecessary.

Guthertz noted agreements the United States has with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands and urged U.S. federal leadership to maintain these commitments, especially if it wants regional support for its Indo-Pacific initiatives.

Meeting adjourned.