



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

**204th Meeting of the
Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council**

**Report on the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands'
Arongol Falú**

CNMI Council member Gene Weaver will provide community updates in the CNMI.

Tournament Update

Five derbies had occurred during this quarter, two pelagic, one shallow bottom and two youth shoreline derbies. On July 12-13 the Saipan Fishermen's Association (SFA) hosted its 41st Annual Saipan International Fishing Tournament. A record number of 29 boats came down from Guam for this event, with 75 vessels total that participated. The tournament showcased impressive catches, with the grand prize awarded for a 241-pound marlin. The billfish category was led by a 213-pound catch, while the total weight category winner recorded 118.5 pounds. Additional highlights included the heaviest wahoo at 29.8 pounds, the heaviest yellowfin at 79.1 pounds, and the heaviest skipjack at 20 pounds.

The Mariana's Visitor's Authority also hosted the Saipan International Fishing Tournament Festival during the second day of the tournament (July 13, 2025). The festival included festival activities featured engaging displays by the CNMI Division of Fish & Wildlife Aquatic Education Program, 500 Sails, and the Department of Public Safety's Boating Safety team. Attendees enjoyed a variety of interactive events, including the Tasi to Table kids' fishing tournament, a *talåya* (cast net) throwing contest hosted by the Talaya Club, and Marianas Maritime Heritage's cultural mapping activities. The Northern Marianas Technical Institute highlighted culinary skills with demonstrations on fish preparation, covering food safety, filleting, scaling, and marination, while also treating festivalgoers to complimentary samples of freshly prepared seafood.

The I Sanhålom Laguna Anglers Association (ISLA) held its 6th Annual Mafuti Derby this past August 23rd. The heaviest mafuti (emperor) caught weighed in at 8.2 pounds while the total weight winner came in at 5.7 pounds. There was a side bet category that included the heaviest trevally caught by in-lagoon trolling which came in at 8.55 pounds.

Two youth shoreline derbies were held this quarter, including the Hooked on Tradition: Youth Fishing Derby and Outreach Fair at Micro Beach in Garapan, Saipan held on August 16, 2025. The event featured categories such as first catch, heaviest catch, and most fish caught. Alongside the derby, the Outreach Fair provided interactive learning opportunities focused on marine life, fishing traditions, and ocean safety. The CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife, National Park Service and ISLA fishing association hosted the event.

The CNMI Office of Youth Affairs hosted a Youth Shoreline Fishing Workshop and Derby on August 23–24, 2025. The first day featured classroom-style sessions with presentations from multiple local agencies covering boating safety, state regulations, water quality, and coastal resource management. Participants also received hands-on training in the use of talaya (cast nets) and rod-and-reel techniques in preparation for the derby.

On the second day, participants took part in a half-day shoreline derby spanning from Micro Beach to Oleai Beach Bar & Grill, with weigh-ins and the awards ceremony held at Fishing Base. A total of 40 youth joined the event, with 25 competing in the rod-and-reel category and 15 in the cast net category.

The Saipan Fishermen's Association (SFA) hosted the 3rd Annual Elijah Craig Bourbon Billfish Jackpot Tournament on September 13, 2025. With a \$1,000 entry fee, unlimited anglers, and a 95% payout per vessel, the tournament drew strong competition and excitement. The winning marlin weighed in at 255 pounds, narrowly surpassing the second-place team by just one pound. The runner-up team still celebrated success by securing \$2,200 through the side bet category. In a heartfelt moment, SFA President Tony Scragg dedicated this year's tournament to former Lt. Governor, former CNMI House Speaker and a 35 year member of SFA, Diego Benavente. In recognition of his many contributions to the fishing community, the event has now been renamed the Diego Benavente Classic Billfish Tournament. Benavente, acknowledging his declining health, expressed his gratitude for the honor and support, underscoring the strong sense of camaraderie and respect that continues to define the CNMI fishing community.

CNMI Council member Pedro Itibus will provide updates on the CNMI government.

Budget Shortfall Threatens CNMI Public Schools

The CNMI Public School System (PSS) is facing significant budgetary challenges for the 2025–2026 fiscal year. Despite a requested budget of \$49.285 million, the House of Representatives has approved only \$31.7 million, nearly \$18 million less than requested. This shortfall may lead to severe measures, including reduced instructional days, staff furloughs, and potential school mergers, such as consolidating middle schools with low enrollment. The Board of Education (BOE) has expressed willingness to work with a \$40 million budget, aligning with the constitutional mandate that at least 25% of local revenues be allocated to education. In

response, students, parents, and teachers have mobilized, organizing protests and meetings with lawmakers to advocate for full funding and to highlight the potential negative impacts on education quality across the Northern Mariana Islands.

As a community, we deeply value our youth, recognizing that they are the future decision-makers and stewards of the CNMI's fisheries and natural resources. Ensuring their access to quality education is essential not only for personal growth but also for the sustainable management of our islands' vital marine resources.

Resumption of Airmail Service from the CNMI

Delegate Kimberlyn King-Hinds has confirmed the resumption of airmail services from the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) to the U.S. mainland, following recent disruptions linked to Executive Order 14324, which suspended the de minimis exemption for low-value imports. The United States Postal Service (USPS) has partnered with a third-party provider qualified by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to ensure compliance with the new regulations, allowing for the continued acceptance, transport, and delivery of mail and packages from the CNMI and Guam to the 50 states.

Delegate King-Hinds worked closely with USPS, CBP, and White House officials to address the complications arising from the executive order's interaction with the territories' unique status outside the U.S. customs territory. She emphasized the importance of reliable mail service for families, businesses, and government operations in the Marianas. While the immediate issue has been resolved, King-Hinds continues to monitor the implementation of the policy to ensure that shipments from the CNMI are treated fairly under the law.

In a related development, Delegate King-Hinds announced that all mail and packages from Guam and the CNMI, dispatched through Guam, were successfully transported to Honolulu on September 9, 2025. This marks a significant step in restoring full airmail services to the region.

This restored service is especially important for the CNMI fishing community, as it allows local fishers, seafood distributors, and coastal businesses to stay connected with family, partners, and customers beyond the islands. Timely shipping of products, samples, and necessary documentation helps support local livelihoods, enables compliance with fisheries regulations, and strengthens the broader network that sustains the Commonwealth's marine resources. By ensuring reliable communication and trade, airmail services play a key role in keeping the CNMI fishing community resilient and connected.

Hotel Association of the Northern Mariana Islands (HANMI)

Average hotel occupancy in the CNMI for July 2025 dropped to 39.3%, down from 45.4% in July 2024. This decline follows a broader downward trend earlier in the year, with April occupancy at 23.6% and June at 22%. Industry leaders attribute the downturn to lost air routes from key markets, including Korea, and the temporary suspension of the EVS-TAP visa program affecting visitors from Hong Kong. Declining occupancy has also impacted local businesses and seasonal employment, including those connected to fisheries tourism, such as sportfishing charters, guided fishing trips, and local seafood markets.

The CNMI's fishing community plays a vital role in both the economy and the sustainable management of marine resources. Reduced tourism revenues can affect the ability of local fishers and related businesses to invest in equipment, conservation initiatives, and community programs that promote responsible fisheries practices. Maintaining robust visitor activity is therefore not only an economic priority but also an important factor in supporting the ongoing stewardship of the Commonwealth's fisheries and marine ecosystems.

Leadership Transition in the CNMI

This quarter brought an important leadership transition for the Commonwealth. The Council honors the late Governor Arnold I. Palacios, who made lasting contributions to fisheries management through his years of dedication and partnership with the Council. His vision and leadership strengthened the CNMI's role in advancing responsible ocean stewardship, and his legacy will continue to guide future work.

The Council also warmly welcomes Governor Dave Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Dennis Mendiola to the new administration. The Council looks forward to collaborating with them in continuing the progress made under Governor Palacios' leadership and in pursuing new opportunities for the sustainable management of the CNMI's fisheries and marine resources.