



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

**205th 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

Two derbies have occurred during the reporting period, both falling under the pelagic category. On October 4, 2025 Tasi To Table hosted its 4th Annual Mix Classic derby at the Saipan, Garapan, Smiling Cove Marina. This tournament has specific rules that each pelagic fish must be paired with another pelagic fish to be qualified. A combination of a 245lbs marlin and a 18lbs wahoo took first place with a total of 263lbs by team Gabby Jo. A combination of a 125lbs marlin and a 25lbs wahoo took second place with a total of 150lbs by team MV Jolene. A combination of a 138lbs marlin and a 2lbs skipjack took third place with a total of 140lbs by team Sweet Candy.

The Annual Bud Light Fishing Derby was held during the Bisita Luta Festival on October 11-12, 2025 on Luta (Rota). This two-day event gathered fishers from across the Marianas to celebrate Luta as the *Jewel of the Marianas*. The Marlin category goes as follows; team TaraKitu Killas weighing in at 137lbs, team Da Reel at 113lbs and team EmmanueL at 112lbs. The Wahoo category goes as follows; team Sea Juan weighing in at 29lbs, TaraKitu Killas at 27lbs and team Fish Guam Heritage at 26lbs. The Yellowfin category goes as follows; team Jernie2 weighing in at 25lbs, Shut Up and Fish at 20lbs and team Checha at 19lbs. The Skipjack category goes as follows; team Da Reel weighing in at 17lbs, Shut Up and Fish at 16lbs and team MV Juliana at 14lbs. The Most Weight category goes as follows; team Fish Guam Malesso weighing in at 247lbs, Shut Up and Fish at 242lbs and team EmmanueL at 192lbs.

Participants from both categories made it home safely, concluding successful tournaments in the Marianas.

Loss of Leadership and Generational Knowledge in CNMI Fisheries

During 2025, the CNMI experienced the loss of several respected leaders within the fishing community, including the Honorable Governor †Arnold I. Palacios, †Michael A. Fleming, †Benigno M. Sablan, and the Honorable Lieutenant Governor †Diego T. Benavente. Each served as a steward of the CNMI's marine resources and contributed meaningfully to fisheries management, conservation, and long-term sustainability efforts. Their passing represents not only the loss of leadership, but also the loss of generational knowledge deeply rooted in local fishing practices, policy development, and cultural stewardship. This knowledge remains highly valued by the community, particularly by the next generation of fishers and resource managers who continue to seek guidance, mentorship, and understanding of traditional and sustainable fisheries practices.

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

CNMI's new Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) System

The CNMI is still in the early stages of implementing Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), and the transition has presented challenges for newer and smaller fish markets. In particular, the monthly cost of approximately \$88 for EBT point-of-sale equipment has created a financial burden that disproportionately affects small-scale operations and roadside vendors. As a result, some vendors have opted not to accept EBT, while others absorb the cost at the expense of already limited profit margins. In contrast, larger and more established fish markets have generally been able to continue operating profitably under the EBT system, especially given program requirements that restrict EBT purchases to locally produced goods such as fresh fish, meat, poultry, fruits, and vegetables, and prohibit use for imported products. While these restrictions are intended to support local food systems, they have highlighted disparities in capacity and financial resilience among several CNMI fish vendors.

Hotel Association of the Northern Mariana Islands (HANMI)

The temporary closure of the Grandvrio Resort Saipan represents a lost opportunity to purchase and promote locally caught fish within the CNMI. As a large hospitality establishment serving residents and visitors, the resort had the capacity to support local fisheries by incorporating locally harvested seafood into its food service operations, thereby strengthening local food systems and contributing to food security. The absence of this potential market during the closure reduces opportunities for fishers and fish markets to expand demand for locally produced fish and highlights the vulnerability of local food economies to disruptions in the tourism sector. This underscores the importance of fostering stronger linkages between fisheries and hospitality to enhance economic resilience and support sustainable, locally based food systems.

Enhanced Connectivity: Opportunities for Local Fisheries and Economic Resilience

Recent developments in air service connectivity may contribute to broader economic resilience for the CNMI, including potential positive effects on local fisheries and food systems. In December 2025, the CNMI welcomed the announcement that Philippine Airlines will resume twice-weekly direct flights between Manila and Saipan beginning in March 2026, strengthening international access to the Marianas after several years without this service. Governor David M. Apatang and the Marianas Visitors Authority highlighted the anticipated benefits to tourism, business travel, and community connections, emphasizing expanded opportunities for economic activity. Improved air connectivity has the potential to increase visitor arrivals and demand for local products, including fresh, locally caught fish supplied to restaurants, markets, and hospitality establishments. This expanded market access could help diversify commercial outlets for fishers and fish markets, supporting both local food security and economic sustainability as the CNMI continues to recover from tourism downturns.

Department of Land and Natural Resources Sustainable Fisheries Fund Update

The CNMI Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) continues to administer the Sustainable Fisheries Fund (SFF) to support fisheries conservation and management initiatives. Approved project extensions include NA20NMF4410242, NA21NMF4410316, and NA22NMF4410199, which have been extended through 2027. Pending requests include NA21NMF4410316 and the SFF 2025 proposals currently under review. Next steps in the program include hiring a Marine Conservation Plan Coordinator to oversee all SFF sub-award projects, drafting a rescope for projects determined no longer feasible following detailed planning, and submitting the rescope requests for review by the Council and subsequently by NOAA's Grants Management Division. These efforts aim to ensure continued alignment of funded projects with CNMI fisheries management priorities and sustainable resource use.

Department of Land and Natural Resources Fishery Management Plan Update

The CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) is actively working on compiling the CNMI Fishery Management Plan, building on past efforts and recent Council guidance. At the 204th Council Meeting held on September 16–17, a recommendation was made by the Council that stated, *"Regarding CNMI fishery issues, the Council directs Council staff to work with the CNMI Division of Fish and Wildlife to provide education and outreach to the commercial fishermen and vendors on the importance of mandatory licensing and reporting to better monitor and understand CNMI's commercial and noncommercial fishery performance."* The Regional Administrator, Sarah Malloy, confirmed that this directive has been completed. Jarad Makaiao noted that a contract was funded to hire Fish-BANC to assist with the development of all three territorial jurisdictional fishery management plans in August of 2025. Council staff followed up with Steve McKagan of PIRO regarding coordination, who stated that while no direct funding had previously been provided for CNMI due to lack of alignment with prior CNMI leadership,

DFW now appears more interested in linking efforts to initiatives supported in other jurisdictions, including FishPath workshops with TNC, data analysis for reef fish population assessments, and the Fish-BANC pilot spatial analysis of fisheries metrics.

These efforts build on prior work, including the 2013 CNMI Fisheries Workshop and Recommendations Report, which brought together the Council, PIFSC, PIRO, DFW, MES, and other fisheries stakeholders. While the report is somewhat dated, CNMI did not previously implement its primary recommendation to establish a working group to examine fisheries issues, opportunities, and next steps—a recommendation that remains relevant based on lessons learned from recent JCR-FMP efforts in American Samoa, Guam, and Hawaii. Council staff noted that guidance on coordination and support may be best provided to the DLNR Secretary, as no contractor is currently in place to provide direct assistance. McKagan added that most JCR-FMP support in other jurisdictions has been funded through CRCP ‘Spend Plan’ allocations for federal PIs, and that the Secretary has submitted an updated set of priorities to CRCP for the next three-year funding cycle, highlighting CNMI’s interest in fisheries support and the potential to leverage these funds depending on budget outcomes over the coming year.