



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE
203rd MEETING OF THE
WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

June 9-11, 2025 Council Plenary
Ala Moana Hotel
Hibiscus Ballroom II
Honolulu, O'ahu, Hawai'i

Approved by Council:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Sword', written over a horizontal line.

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:

- Taulapapa William 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)
- Francisco Perez (Guam)
- Matthew Ramsey (Hawai‘i)
- Gerald Weaver (CNMI)
- Pedro Itibus (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)
- Jeremy Raynal, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- Colin Brinkman, U.S. Department of State
- 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; Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Chair Jim Lynch; Keith Hagg, Elena Onaga, Kristen Placek, and Frederick Tucher from the NOAA General Counsel Pacific Islands (GCPI). Vice chair Roger Dang (Hawai‘i) and Shaelene Kamaka‘ala (Hawai‘i) were absent.

II. Approval of the 203rd Council Meeting Agenda

Sword asked for a motion to approve the 203rd meeting minutes.

Moved by Soliai, seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

III. Approval of the 202nd Council Meeting Minutes

Sword asked for a motion to approve the 202nd meeting minutes.

Moved by Soliai, seconded by Guthertz.
Motion passed.

IV. Executive Director's Report

Simonds opened the 203rd Council meeting with a preview of the upcoming sessions, including remarks from Eugenio Piñeiro-Soler, the new NMFS assistant administrator and Sam Rauch, the deputy assistant administrator for Regulatory Programs. Simonds noted President Trump's April proclamation opening Johnston and Jarvis Atolls and Wake Island in the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument (PIHMNM) to commercial fishing within 50 to 200 miles of the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Simonds thanked the president on behalf of the Council, fishing industries and communities of Hawai'i and American Samoa for the opportunity for the fishermen to fish in the waters while continuing to protect nearshore habitat and vulnerable species.

During the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) meeting in May 2025, Simonds expressed concern over budget cuts, especially given that the Pacific Islands region has historically operated with limited data and funding, unlike other regions. Simonds emphasized the need for NOAA and councils to align science and management amid these budget constraints and reported that the Council still had not received its funding allocation to operate beyond July 1.

Simonds reported on the Council's responses to the Executive Orders (EOs), highlighting that federally imposed burden on the region's fisheries come from other applicable laws and expressed frustration that Pacific fishermen cannot sell their sustainably harvested billfish outside the islands. She called for reviews of unnecessary restrictions and trade barriers that harm local fisheries, including the dumping of cheap, chemically treated foreign fish that undercuts local markets. EO 14192 and others related to seafood competitiveness and monument fishing restrictions, will be discussed in detail by the Council. Simonds highlighted most Council actions are exempt from the deregulation requirements, such as annual catch limit (ACL) specifications, while others like the Aquaculture Amendment are not. Simonds discussed how the recent EO on "Restoring Gold Standard Science" (EO 14303) cited problems similar to issues faced by this Council.

Simonds noted the president's June proclamation of National Ocean Month also referred to the opening of the PIHMNM.

Final action will be taken on implementing electronic monitoring (EM) for American Samoa and the Hawai'i longline fisheries, noting that the EM program costs less than the observer program but raises questions about who should fund it. Simonds reaffirmed the Council's position that the federal government should bear those costs, especially given the narrow margins under which these fisheries operate.

Simonds closed the report by reviewing IRA funding allocations, with projects led by contractors familiar with the region and Council priorities, including scenario planning, protected species work, community engagement, consultation and capacity building.

Soliai asked what happens to the Council when it does not receive the funding by July 1, 2025.

Simonds said the Council will continue to operate as far out as possible with the available funding. She noted that NMFS at the CCC meeting indicated they would fund the councils incrementally, and the councils are expecting to receive three months of funding soon.

V. Agency Reports

A. National Marine Fisheries Service

[Remarks from Piñeiro-Soler and Rauch were provided at the start of day 2.]

Sword welcomed Piñeiro-Soler and expressed appreciation for being present with fellow Council members and for honoring the commitment as the president's appointee. Soliai, Igisomar, Perez and Ramsey also welcomed Piñeiro-Soler in Samoan, Refaluwash, Chamorro and English. Sword invited Piñeiro-Soler to provide his remarks and asked how the Western Pacific Council can help bring fishing back to the country.

Piñeiro-Soler addressed the Council and said he will work together with the Council so that the people in the region have the space to fish and go back to cultural practices. He said it is not about one size fits all or about fish, it is about the culture and the nature of what the people have been doing for many generations. He said he will assist the Council in any way he can to comply with the deliberations and decisions of this Council.

Guthertz said it is refreshing to hear the commitment to work closely with the Council and hoped that regulatory review will be a bit part of Piñeiro-Soler's work, noting that regulations can be onerous, overburdening and at times unnecessary. She invited Piñeiro-Soler and Rauch to visit the Council members in their respective island jurisdictions to learn more about the region's fisheries and the people and to understand the issues and contributions.

Simonds welcomed Piñeiro-Soler back to the Council and said she is looking forward to working with him and for his visit to the region.

Piñeiro-Soler said it would be a privilege to see everyone soon.

Soliai said American Samoa is happy to have Piñeiro-Soler as the leader for NMFS during this Administration and hopeful to have the support as American Samoa endeavors to obtain full small island developing states recognition and benefits within the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) this year. There is a lot of preliminary work that needs to be done, and Soliai said they have a good strategy working with Andrew Lawler and the team in PIRO to get it across the finish line.

Piñeiro-Soler acknowledged Soliai's comment and said he believes they will be successful.

Ramsey asked what Piñeiro-Soler sees as a challenge and opportunity for the Western Pacific Region, which covers a vast geographic area.

Piñeiro-Soler said he is personally very passionate about modern science, modern technology, and about involving fishermen in every aspect of the policy of decision making and every study. He is certain that with the knowledge that fishermen possess as masters of the ocean and with NMFS's support, the Western Pacific Region will do fine. This Administration decided to help the American fishermen, which means all the islands from the Western Pacific. It is important to NMFS that fishermen will be treated individually as they deserve, and NMFS is

going to respect the culture, the way people do things and have been for generations. NMFS is here to support the fishermen and to assist the Council regardless of the distance. He said the United States is one nation, we are all in this together, and NMFS and the Department of Commerce (DOC) is right behind the Council in making the organization a successful endeavor.

Rauch addressed the Council and provided an overview of the various EOs. EO 14276, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness,” issued April 17, 2025, builds upon a prior EO issued in the last Trump Administration and explicitly lays out a process of engaging the councils. The Seafood EO provides a comprehensive approach to dealing with U.S. fisheries by looking at regulatory burden, science issues and trade issues that can impact the U.S. fishing economy. U.S. fisheries landings have been about 8.5 billion pounds since 2020, which is about a billion pounds less than the 9.5 billion pounds landed consistently for 30 years prior. Profitability has also been in decline across the country, and U.S. fisheries are in a state of transition. The Seafood EO requires taking a look at these issues to return the U.S. seafood and the structure it supports to a healthier, more dominant state in the U.S. marketplace. The Seafood EO lays out a process for NMFS in cooperation with the councils take comments and work through actions that can relieve regulatory burden, increase production, stabilize markets, improve access to markets, enhance economic profitability and prevent closures. The president has asked the councils to provide comments on those recommended actions, and to the extent that those actions are fishing regulations within the purview of the Council, commit to a work plan and schedule for implementation to ensure that these actions are prioritized. Concurrently, NMFS is supposed to solicit direct public comments from the fishing industry, technology experts, and others on innovative ideas to improve fishery management and science. NMFS is also supposed to have additional public engagement to ensure other executive agencies are focusing on core fishery management and science to directly support priority needs and the seafood supply chain. Once the suite of actions are identified, NMFS is supposed to present proposals for regulatory change to the administration through the Unified Agenda, which is a list of regulatory actions that the administration expects to take in the next six months. As part of this process, NMFS anticipates issuing a federal register notice shortly, which would lay out their views of over-regulated fisheries and start the process to engage the public. Piñeiro-Soler has already sent out a request to the councils for their recommended actions to be submitted by a certain date. To the extent that the recommendations that NMFS gathers from the public involve the councils, NMFS will try to get those to the Council for consideration as part of its deliberations. Given the timing, NMFS expects it to be a rolling situation where NMFS will provide what they have to the Council as they receive them and will try to work with the Council on the ideas so the president’s request of 180 days can be met.

The Seafood EO also includes a directive to the secretary of commerce to conduct a review of all of the existing monuments in consultation with the Secretary of Interior and to provide recommendations within 180 days on any that should be open to commercial fishing. In doing so, NMFS is supposed to consider whether the opening of the monuments to commercial fishing would be consistent with the preservation of the historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures and other objects of historic or scientific interest originally identified in the proclamations establishing the marine monuments. Rauch noted that the president has already taken action on one of the monuments but NMFS anticipates providing recommendations to the president in a timely manner on whether to open the rest of the monuments and associated considerations.

The Seafood EO also recognizes that the process is built on good and solid science, and that science can be expensive. The president has directed NMFS to incorporate less expensive and more reliable technologies as well as cooperative research programs into fisheries

assessments. NMFS has also been directed to expand the exempted fishing permit program to promote fishing opportunities nationwide, and to take all appropriate action to modernize data collection and analytical practices that will improve the responsiveness of fishery management to real-time ocean conditions. The existing data collection around the country is an expensive enterprise, and NMFS is looking at ways to open up to new and more efficient ways to collect that data.

The remainder of the Seafood EO is mostly focused on trade issues, including elevating the NOAA seafood strategy to an America First Seafood Strategy by transforming it into a broader Administration-wide strategy. The strategy would bring in other agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture to accelerate efforts to educate American consumers about the health benefits of seafood and to increase seafood purchases in nutrition programs. The Seafood EO also has a directive to provide the president with a comprehensive seafood trade strategy within 60 days based on the strategy that was in development at the end of the first Trump Administration. The Seafood EO also requires the U.S. trade representative to examine the relevant trade practices of major seafood producing nations, as well as a requirement to consider revising or rescinding the expansive Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) and reinvigorate the existing program.

Rauch also provided updates on EO 14192, “Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation,” that requires identification of 10 deregulatory actions for every new regulatory action that would impose new costs on either the American public or the taxpayer. Routine fishery management actions such as opening and closing fishing seasons, annual specification processes, and annualized fishery management measures, are exempt from the deregulatory process under EO 14192. For other actions, much of what the councils did in the first Trump Administration was considered deregulatory, as much of the fishery management structure was set up years ago and a lot of what the councils do is look for opportunities to adjust that system to provide more economic opportunity, consistent with National Standard 7. NMFS expects Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) regulations to continue to be the deregulatory bill player, and will continue to work with the councils to emphasize deregulatory actions. Any discretionary regulatory action will have a lower priority. Rauch also provided a brief overview of EO 14303 issued May 23, 2025. The White House is expected to provide guidance for agencies to work on its science structure so it is reproducible, transparent, and avoids conflict of interest. Rauch noted that these are hallmarks of the Council's scientific process, which includes the SSC and peer review processes, and many of the Council actions are anticipated to fit very well with this EO.

Muña referred to one of the Council’s recommended actions from EO 13921, “Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth,” (original Seafood EO) aimed at reducing Endangered Species Act (ESA) litigation risks, and said an additional change to consider would be to require consultation with the local community prior to litigation if any organization wishes to initiate a lawsuit regarding habitat of the marine environment. Muña said they are battling on all fronts with different aspects of ESA that are being implemented, seemingly from good places but by people who have no history or connection to the resources. Giant clams being proposed for listing is one of those examples, and an action that is in direct contrast to the economic prosperity that the president is pushing. The giant clam action would inhibit Guam’s ability to achieve diversification of the economy. She said there should be a provision to limit the ability for those groups to initiate litigation.

Rauch said NMFS is restrained to follow the statutory provisions, noting that some of what Muña suggested would require a congressional change. He said NMFS would be happy to

pass it onto the administration, and they can decide whether to send it onto Congress. This administration is interested in working with Congress on many things including some potential ESA amendments, so there may be interest.

Muña said she is glad to hear Rauch will forward the concerns on their behalf.

Sword said in terms of trade issues, American Samoa has lost a cannery due to tariff relaxation on foreign loins (from 12% down to 3%), so the whole process needs to be considered. Loss of the Chicken of the Sea cannery was a huge blow to the economy and resulted in a loss of capacity to lower the number of imports coming into the United States. Sword asked if the Council would need to include recommendations on tariffs as part of the EO response or would need to talk to the trade people individually.

Rauch said the Council could certainly talk to the trade people individually if it so wishes. Based on the last submission of recommendations, this Council believes there are additional issues beyond MSA regulations that are impeding U.S. fisheries in the Western Pacific and has asked for actions that may entail other agencies. As with the last round of recommendations, if NMFS receives recommendations that another agency or the president would need to deal with, NMFS will forward them onto the applicable agencies. The Seafood EO directs the secretary of commerce to engage the public on actions of Executive Departments and agencies, which suggests that this initiative is not limited to the DOC.

Soliai said the Council's agenda is mostly aligned with the Administration's agenda with respect to supporting fisheries. He reminded Rauch and Piñeiro-Soler that this region has two of the top 10 ports in the United States with Hawai'i and American Samoa, which speaks a lot to what this region brings to the nations. Some of the other issues raised with the trade representatives were dumping and countervailing, which is becoming more prevalent, and Soliai hopes the new tariffs that the Administration is imposing can help promote more domestic production. He also noted concerns of gassed tuna and other treated tuna coming into the United States. A few years ago, the Council wrote a paper and requested a full government approach that encompasses various sectors of the government to address these problems. Soliai said if it is not going to be a full government strategy, it would be helpful to funnel everything through NMFS headquarters to get the broader discussion. That is what the Council has been doing to get the message across to the various secretaries this year. He said he is glad to see the focus on deregulation, noting that the region's fisheries are being regulated to death. Soliai also noted that the new tariffs on imports from foreign countries are actually impacting fish imports from the insular areas as the cannery in American Samoa is paying the 10% tariff for imports coming into the United States, and American Samoa is awaiting written confirmation from U.S. Customs and Border Protection to resolve that issue. He said he plans to put that in a recommendation that NMFS can help American Samoa with. Soliai acknowledged the positive feedback from Rauch and Piñeiro-Soler, and said the work needs to be done expeditiously as possible to address some of these problems.

Rauch said the president does lay out ideas that unfair trade practices have put seafood markets at a competitive disadvantage, and that the erosion of American seafood competitiveness at the hands of unfair trade practices must end. Considering the language in the Seafood EO, Rauch believes that the president would agree with Soliai on a broader approach than just the NMFS approach to deal with the trade issues. One of the reasons landings are down is that the market is not there, and fishermen do not want to buy gas, hire crew and take the vessel out if they will not be able to sell it. There are some regulatory aspects as well, but as in the case of

Alaska, fish are still there to catch but there is about a 50% decline in profitability, so those trade related issues are one of the things the president is asking NMFS to look at.

Simonds said the Council members and the staff have been working on responses to the EOs, and NMFS will be receiving recommendations that include ESA actions, Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) actions, and actions under other statutes, in addition to MSA actions. An example of an MMPA action is the removal of the Southern Exclusion Zone, which is a closure that is triggered when the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery accidentally hooks a small number of false killer whales.

Rauch said although the president explicitly asked the Council for actions and to commit to a work plan, which he interprets as being an explicit request to the Council on MSA actions, the very next paragraph in the EO talks about soliciting public comments on innovative ideas to improve fisheries management and science within their requirements of not just MSA but also the ESA, MMPA and other applicable laws. This clearly indicates that the president has asked for a broad suite of recommendations not just on MSA that might be taken.

Sword asked how the gold standard science EO may help the NMFS science centers and other scientists to get things done, noting that the other councils at the CCC discussed issues with their Science Centers taking forever to complete biological opinions (BiOps) and other work.

Rauch said Cisco Werner, former NMFS chief scientist, retired and Evan Howell is taking over the role of acting chief scientist. He talks almost every day with Howell about ways to improve the science, as the existing enterprise is becoming too expensive to continue. NMFS was already planning to figure out a way to streamline the science to collect the data needed for management in a cost-efficient way, prioritizing what the management cycle really needs in terms of reports and stock assessments.

The president has asked to restore the integrity of the scientific enterprise and to look for ways to incorporate less expensive but more reliable technologies into the process of modernizing data collection, so NMFS is working on ways to change the ways of doing things. He envisions the councils to work with the regional science centers, and NMFS is working nationally to provide space for that to happen to collect data with less expense but better serve needed management. What is needed for management should still be a driving factor behind collecting scientific data. NMFS does not yet have the specifics on how that will be done for any particular council, but the general direction was rolled out at the CCC meeting in May 2025.

Simonds said she is waiting on the template from NMFS headquarters.

Rauch said NMFS is working with its Office of Sustainable Fisheries and Office of Science and Technology on the process to translate the visionary statement into real on-the-ground action items that can be worked on together.

Soliai asked whether assigning responsibility to regulate the U.S.-based purse seine fleet in American Samoa as a locally based fleet in the territory would be considered deregulation from the U.S. perspective.

Rauch said he did not know, but the consideration would be in terms of cost. If the territory assigned the exact same regulatory measures as the United States, then it may not be considered deregulatory but rather considered neutral. He said while that would be his general

view, he does not have enough experience in the way that this administration is considering deregulatory actions.

1. Pacific Islands Regional Office

Malloy presented the PIRO report, starting with introductions of new NMFS leadership. In addition to Piñeiro-Soler, Lawler is the new principal deputy assistant secretary of International Fisheries and will oversee international negotiations through the regional fishery management organizations (RFMOs) and bilateral negotiations. Neil Jacobs has been nominated as the NOAA administrator, and his confirmation hearing is pending.

Regarding regulatory actions, the DOC has stood up a robust process to move mission critical regulations forward. PIRO has not issued any new rulemakings in the new administration, but is continuing to work on both fisheries and protected resources rulemakings, including submitting them to NMFS HQ for review where they are being worked on.

Regarding new EOs and proclamations, within a week of the proclamation to rescind the prohibition on commercial fishing in the 50 to 200 nm zone in the PIHMNM, PIRO issued a letter to the longline and purse seine permit holders alerting them that the waters were available to fishing. The next step pursuant to the proclamation will be to prepare rulemaking to rescind the regulations that are on the books to codify the original prohibition on commercial fishing.

Regarding protected species, rulemaking that had been paused are moving forward again, and PIRO is continuing internal preparations for the listing of giant clams, extending the ESA 4(d) protections to oceanic whitetip sharks, and to designate critical habitat for green sea turtles. NMFS has also resumed work to evaluate the petition to list 41 Indo-Pacific corals, and is also working on the final rule to designate coral critical habitat, the latter of which is due July 15, 2025, pursuant to a court order.

Regarding international fisheries, preparations are underway for the 22nd WCPFC meeting in December 2025 in Manila. The first Permanent Advisory Committee since the new administration was convened May 28, 2025, to gather input regarding U.S. positions for the upcoming WCPFC subsidiary meetings. NMFS also co-hosted a webinar with the NMFS West Coast Region to gather input on North Pacific albacore issues, and NMFS is fully engaged in preparations for the WCPFC-Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) Joint Working Group on bluefin tuna and the WCPFC Northern Committee.

Regarding sustainable fisheries, most of PIRO's work over the last few months has been on EM and the crew training program. PIRO is also working to finalize the Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) omnibus amendment and associated regulations for aquaculture permitting, including a programmatic BiOp.

Malloy also highlighted PIRO organizational changes, including the retirement of Gerry Davis, assistant regional administrator for Habitat Conservation Division, as well as all of the supervisors in the division. Dawn Golden, assistant regional administrator for Protected Resources Division, is now heading the essential fish habitat work, and Jarad Makaiau, assistant regional administrator for Sustainable Fisheries Division is heading the coral program, and Stephanie Bennett is heading up the marine national monuments program.

Malloy noted that she had received word the previous day from Brian Pawlak that the funding would be released to the councils within the next week or two and before July 1, 2025, and that 70% of this year's funding to the councils have been dispersed to date.

Muña asked for clarification on the giant clam listing and coral and green sea turtle critical habitat rules and whether they all have the July 15 deadline.

Malloy said only the coral critical habitat final rulemaking will be sent to the *Federal Register* by July 15. PIRO is continuing to work toward the next step for all other rules, which is the decision of the administration as to how and what the final rule would look like. The next step for these rules may be in the form of a final rule similar to the proposed rule or a final rule that takes a different direction than the proposed rule. These rules are being pushed up through the political review phases and will be released in whatever order the political leadership decides.

Guthertz asked if the concerns expressed in Guam regarding giant clams are being considered.

Malloy said they are considering all public comments and incorporating them into their recommendation.

Itibus asked what would happen to the fishing considering the lawsuit on the monument.

Placek said she will be providing a report on that lawsuit in her report later in the agenda.

Igisomar asked to whom he should direct questions regarding the fishery management plan (FMP) that CNMI was working on with Davis.

Malloy said Makaiau and his staff have taken over the jurisdictional coral reef fishery plans. She said Igisomar can reach out to Steve McKagan and others, but Makaiau would be the contact if a more senior person is needed.

2. Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center

Charles Littnan presented the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) report. The Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review (WPSAR) process for the CNMI bottomfish complex update stock assessment was held in April 2025, chaired by Milani Chaloupka, and two additional panelists David Itano and Keena Leon Guerrero. The stock assessment was led by Erin Bohaboy. The panel concluded that the update assessment was the best scientific information available (BSIA) with results showing that the bottomfish management unit species (BMUS) was not overfished and not subject to overfishing.

The region's first Marine Resource Education Program (MREP) was held and received positive feedback from all PIFSC staff who were involved. PIFSC hosted the group at the NOAA Daniel K. Inouye Regional Center for a day and received a lot of good questions from the participants.

PIFSC continues its international efforts in fisheries by upholding the gold standard science. This involves collaborating across the Pacific with various scientific groups to ensure that all data contributing to stock assessments and management relevant to our fisheries adheres to the highest scientific standards. This commitment fosters an open, transparent, and reproducible process. A recent example is the annual pre-assessment workshop held by the

Pacific Community (SPC), attended by PIFSC staff Michelle Sculley, Felipe Carvalho and Nicholas Ducharme-Barth. The workshop focused on assessments of skipjack tuna, oceanic whitetip shark, and Southwestern Pacific swordfish, as well as a revised assessment for striped marlin. Ducharme-Barth presented outputs from the NOAA-SPC striped marlin workshop and stayed for an additional week afterwards to advance open science approaches to stock assessment development and make scientific findings more accessible to stakeholders, enhance transparency, improve understanding of underlying data, and ensure the reproducibility of scientific processes regardless of who attempts to replicate the work. PIFSC is also exploring the use of artificial intelligence as a tool to enhance workflow efficiencies, reduce labor, and expedite the dissemination of products to the public.

The Cobb trawl used for environmental sampling on the R/V *Oscar Elton Sette* had not been working since 2017. An initial test to get the Cobb trawl back in the water in March 2025 was successful and it is expected to be used for a full sampling mission in fall 2025.

PIFSC's stock assessment program developed a scientific communication tool to engage the fishing community when describing complex stock assessments. The tool demonstrates how shifts in data inputs, like commercial versus noncommercial catch proportions or the number of licensed fishermen, can alter model outputs and management concerns. The tool fosters a more transparent and understandable dialogue, emphasizing the critical importance of fishermen's input and perceptions.

Regarding staffing updates, PIFSC did not suffer the same significant loss in one particular area, but has lost more than 20% of its staff since mid-2024 with retirements and termination of probationary employees. That has had an impact on PIFSC's analytical expertise as well as recent jurisdictional staff who were serving as vital go-betweens for PIFSC in the community. PIFSC can continue the majority of its mission, but some slowdowns are expected.

Ramsey asked where the Cobb trawls will be used.

Littnan said the upcoming survey that will utilize the Cobb trawls will take place in Hawai'i and the broader pelagic areas in the region.

B. NOAA Office of General Counsel Pacific Islands Section

Placek provided the GCPI report. A new case filed in Hawai'i federal court, *Kāpa 'a, et al., v. Trump, et al.*, challenged President Trump's proclamation opening the PIHMNM to commercial fishing within 50 to 200 nautical miles (nm) offshore. The plaintiffs asserted violations of the Antiquities Act, the U.S. Constitution, the Administrative Procedures Act, the MSA, and the National Environment Policy Act. The plaintiffs are seeking a declaration holding the proclamation unlawful and an injunction directing the government to continue to prohibit commercial fishing in the monument expansion area. NMFS PIRO subsequently received a notice of intent to sue (NOI) under the ESA for violation of that statute regarding President Trump's proclamation and resulting actions. The 60-day NOI will lapse August 2025.

Willie v. Raimondo filed in March 2022 challenged NMFS's role 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 Appointments Clause. The district court in favor of the federal government agreed that ratification of the approach rule by the undersecretary of commerce affirmed the validity of the rule and cured any possible defects.

Plaintiffs filed an appeal to the Fourth Circuit and a hearing was held May 8, 2025, with a decision pending.

Center for Biological Diversity v. NMFS challenged NMFS's denial of the petition to issue protective regulation for 20 threatened coral species pursuant to Section 4(d) of the ESA. The district court issued an order March 6, 2025, on the parties' cross motions for summary judgment. The district court ultimately remanded the case back to NMFS but did not impose a deadline. The plaintiffs have appealed parts of this ruling with briefs due July 2025.

Guthertz asked whether litigation was filed challenging the actions taken by President Trump for American Samoa.

Placek said there was a lawsuit with respect to President Trump's proclamation opening the PIHMNM, previously known as the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, but the monument is not located in American Samoa and no lawsuits are pending in American Samoa.

Soliai asked whether NMFS had filed a response on the NOI, and if the NOI was from the same parties.

Placek said NMFS has not filed a response to the NOI, which was filed by the same parties as the Pacific Remote Island Areas (PRIA) monument lawsuit, by Kāpa'a, Conservation Council for Hawai'i and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Sakoda asked why the spinner dolphin appeal was filed in the Fourth Circuit.

Placek said the venue was in the District Court of Maryland, and the NMFS rule is federal jurisdiction, so the nexus to the federal government being in Washington DC and Maryland allows for such matters to be heard in the Fourth Circuit Court.

Igisomar asked if the litigation stops fishing that was allowed back into monument waters, and whether a judge has ruled on the complaint.

Placek said no order has been issued by the judge, as it is just a complaint at this time. Placek also said fishing is still open at this time in the monuments.

Guthertz asked if there had been any fishing in the monuments.

Malloy said there have been a handful of trips.

C. US Coast Guard

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci reported on the USCG District 14 operations. District 14 responded to 1,167 cases that consisted of search and rescue, law enforcement and marine environmental protection response, ports, waterways and coastal security missions. USCG Cutter *William Hart* completed a 6,600-nm patrol of the Central Pacific including American Samoa, Fiji and Tonga, supporting them in U.S. border security, counter-illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing efforts and international agreements. This deployment conducted 10 boardings with no findings of any violations of partner nations laws, U.S. laws and WCPFC conservation agreement management measures. Cutter *Harriet Lane*, deployed in the Central Pacific engaged with partners in French Polynesia by conducting high seas boardings, and bilateral boardings in the Cook Islands. So far, this deployment has completed six boardings with one violation of

WCPFCs conservation management measures found. The *Harriet Lane* hosted NOAA's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Lawler and is scheduled to patrol through American Samoa in June and will visit Pago Pago twice.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci highlighted USCG deployments, program supports and operations across the Western and Central Pacific. USCG C-130 completed a patrol in American Samoa that included overflights of Swains Island and the Manu'a Islands. Onboard were representatives from NOAA and DMWR. USCG also partnered with CNMI Department of Public Safety and Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) to support the 21st Annual Mahi-Mahi Fishing Derby in Saipan. USCG supported the Forum Fisheries Agency Operation Tui Moana that included assets and personnel from 10 nations, resulting in over 80 boardings across the Western and Central Pacific.

Upcoming patrols include Cutter *Myrtle Hazard*'s deployment to the Western Pacific in August 2025, Cutter *Oliver Berry* patrol of the Central Pacific Sept. 2025, and support for Operation Nasse in July 2025 conducted by Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States dedicated to deterring IUU fishing in the Western Pacific.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci relayed Rear Adm. Regan's appreciation of the letter from the Council in April 2025, with a response forthcoming. Captain Nicholas Worst is tasked to assume command of Sector Honolulu July 2025. Rear Adm. Regan directed Captain Worst to ensure meetings between USCG and American Samoa stakeholders would occur soon.

Sword said American Samoa's average mahimahi and palo caught is around 28 pounds with a 35-pounder caught in 2024.

Weaver thanked the USCG for the recent search and rescue in Guam of the vessel that returned home safely.

Soliai echoed Weaver's comment and reiterated his appreciation of the USCG's presence in the Pacific. Soliai referred to a map showing foreign fishing effort around Hawai'i and the U.S. territories, noting that the map showed the concerns regarding China and their fishing practices within the Pacific. The American Samoa longline fleet is continuing to experience a decline due to the reduced catch per unit effort (CPUE) attributed to increased efforts in the Pacific by distant water fishing nations such as China. The presence of the USCG is important. Soliai echoed the request made by current and former American Samoa governors on stationing a Cutter in the territory to have protection by the USCG, rather than New Zealand.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci said the concerns will continue to be relayed to Rear Adm. Regan.

Soliai acknowledged the transition of Lt. Cody Baggett departing American Samoa, and expressed his appreciation for Lt. Baggett's support of the territory, particularly the industry.

Guthertz asked if the USCG has intercepted any individuals attempting to get into Guam illegally since the 202nd Council meeting.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci said he will confirm with Guam, but no reports have been provided to him since the 202nd Council meeting of interceptions of migrants traveling across the Rota channel.

Guthertz reported an abandoned dinghy that was found two weeks prior with food, clothing and other paraphernalia, evidence of Chinese citizens arriving in Guam illegally through CNMI. Guam is concerned and is still searching for these individuals.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci said he will relay the concern to USCG Guam Sector. He asked if Guthertz knew of the location of the dinghy.

Guthertz said it might have been in the waters off the marina in Agana.

Sword thanked Lt. Cmdr. Guanci and the USCG American Samoa Sector for all the hard work in American Samoa. Sword recalled Lt. Baggett's efforts in the territory and how he always showed up when needed, giving great advice and helping the longliners with their SOLAS, as well as finding solutions to problems. The territory does not have designated personnel to take care of the safety equipment the same way Hawai'i and other places do, and the care from Lt. Baggett was appreciated. Sword said more work needs to be done to align the recreational vessel rules with Hawai'i or other territories. The current recreational fishermen are required to follow the commercial rules for commercial fishing boats, which becomes strenuous. He hopes the local contingent helps make changes to the territory so more people can fish.

D. Enforcement

1. NOAA Office of Law Enforcement

Martina Sagapolu provided an overview of the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement's (OLE) activities from Mar. 1, 2025, to May 31, 2025. OLE responded to 48 incident cases this quarter, including 14 involving protected species and 24 related to fisheries. Of the 48 cases, 19 were from Hawai'i, 14 from American Samoa, five from Guam and none from the CNMI. Zero summary settlements were issued for sustainable fishery violation and three for marine mammal cases all occurring on the Big Island of Hawai'i. Several \$100 summary settlements were issued for the illegal approach of spinner dolphins on the Big Island's west side.

From 2023 to 2025, reported incidents have dropped due to the number of partners in the field working collaboratively with OLE. Six officers were on the ground along with OLE's Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) partners, proving a challenge for OLE with the decrease of officers and partners available.

OLE conducted 78 patrols during this period, 68 of which occurred in Hawai'i, two in American Samoa, eight in Guam and none in the CNMI. These patrols involved DOCARE officers from the Big Island and Maui. OLE is currently working closely with partners in CNMI and officers assigned to Guam on patrols for the CNMI.

Sagapolu highlighted OLE patrol, monitoring, inspections and outreach efforts such as the career day at Agueda I Johnson Middle School. A lot of OLE's work has shifted to seafood import inspections in collaboration with the USCG. Guam Customs and Quarantine collaborated with JEA partners and conducted a SIMP inspection on a container of 42 pallets of tuna cans from Thailand arriving without a tuna tracking certification. The pallets are being held until the proper documentation is found, but OLE and the Maritime Interdiction Task Force are working to return the product to the country or have it forfeited to the government.

Guthertz asked for the value of each tuna can that was confiscated.

Sagapolu said she believes it sells for \$3/can.

Sword asked about the quantity of cans in each pallet, and whether they were all cans and not pouches.

Sagapolu said there are 24 cans in a case but did not know the actual number of cases in a pallet. All the confiscated tuna were in cans.

Weaver asked when the CNMI will see patrol within the territory.

Sagapolu said OLE should be assigning an officer soon who will be sent out to Guam and will work on an operation with USFWS.

Soliai asked how OLE is addressing the concern of the possible SIMP violation on the vessel, and if any preventative measures have been taken to address the dilemma, being that his probably would not be the only vessel or shipment that raises red flags.

Sagapolu said it is a network effort and the timing of the product's arrival matters. Sagapolu recalled an investigation a couple years prior of a vessel containing fish that docked, unloaded, OLE tracked but by the time OLE completed the document verification process, the product was loaded onto a cargo ship that had taken off. The fish was tracked to Vietnam and Thailand, and no trace after that. Eight transshipments were brought in together with the cargo. Timing makes things difficult, hence, the importance of collaborative effort with JEA partners. To prevent this from occurring, OLE and its partners need to ensure enough resources to track the boat and the fleet on arrival and during departure. Until OLE can increase enforcement officers to assist in the territories, this will continue to be a challenge and OLE's high priority.

Igisomar asked for clarification of the reports provided on OLE's patrol and whether it includes efforts by USCG or patrols strictly pertaining to NOAA OLE.

Sagapolu said the reports are of efforts OLE participates in or leads. If OLE utilizes the \ state partners' assets, these patrols will also be included in the OLE report.

Muña asked if the importer of the tuna cans was identified and provided to Customs and Quarantine for connection.

Sagapolu said the importer's information was provided to the Customs and Quarantine Division.

Sword asked if any other territory had any occurrence of OLE inspection resulting in cans of tuna returned.

Sagapolu said Guam has had this case as well.

Guthertz asked what happens to the cans of tuna if they're not repatriated, if they are destroyed or turned over to charities.

Sagapolu redirected this discussion to GCPI. It is of practice for the product to be destroyed to prevent it from entering commerce, but a challenge is found in the donation portion to a nonprofit organization. Sagapolu recalled a previous incident in which a shipment landed in Long Beach, California and a hurricane hit parts of Florida. There were challenges in donating the product, but the company decided to instead send it directly to the country that was impacted by the hurricane.

Guthertz said the idea of donation is better than having the product destroyed, as there is a need.

2. NOAA Office of General Counsel Enforcement Section

Melissa Goldman, NOAA Enforcement Attorney, provided a brief report on enforcement cases and activities in the Pacific Islands Region. Goldman, has been working with OLE partners and USCG boarding teams on a statement writing and evidence workshop, and working with PIRO International Fisheries Division, OLE and USCG partners to organize and assess outstanding compliance cases under the WCPFC. The NOAA Office of General Counsel Enforcement Section publishes its charging decisions, settlements and cases that go to hearing on the Section's website under the charging information tab.

Goldman is currently evaluating about a half a dozen case packages referred by OLE, four of which are civil prosecutions. One reported case involved an individual from the Big Island who was charged under the MMPA with one count of violating special regulations for Hawai'i spinner dolphins by unlawfully approaching within 50 yards, and another count of assault on an authorized enforcement officer and obstructing the investigation after allegedly confronting the officer upon exiting the water. A \$34,500 notice of violation and assessment was issued with the case, and the parties involved are preparing for a civil hearing before an administrative law judge likely to take place later this year. Another new case involves an owner and operator of a longline fishing vessel charged jointly and severally under the MSA for unlawfully fishing within the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) prohibited area. Both respondents accepted liability for the violation and the case settled for just under \$8,000 to be paid over 12 months; the case has since been transferred to NOAA's Office of Finance.

Igisomar asked in relation to the second case as to where the money goes to.

Goldman said NOAA takes out the administrative cost with the remainder going to the territory the incident took place in. For the second case, since it occurred in Hawai'i, the remainder of the money will go to the operating budget for OLE.

Sakuda asked if the case on the non-permitted vessel was related to the one 7-nm offshore.

Goldman said the first case had a longline permit but was not authorized to be fishing within the closed area. The longline vessel had a minor incursion into the closure area, about two nm.

E. US State Department

Brinkman provided the U.S. State Department report. The U.S. State Department concluded the designation of Lawler as the alternate federal commissioner for the WCPFC and the IATTC. Brinkman highlighted meetings the United States did not participate in, including the UN Ocean Conference, the BBNJ Preparatory Committee meeting and the 2025 Ocean Conference in the Republic of Korea. The U.S. State Department received the Council's letter requesting information on the status of the foreign assistance review and the potential impacts of the outcome on council equities. In response to the Council's request on South Pacific Tuna Treaty Economic Assistance Agreement payments to the Forum Fisheries Agency and those tied to the Compact of Free Association, Brinkman said COFA payments are not considered foreign assistance and therefore are not subject to the same review process.

Guthertz asked if the U.S. State Department was aware of China's expansion into the Western Pacific compact countries, an hour away from Guam. In the state of Yap within the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), an agreement was made with China to rebuild a World War II airfield in which a ceremony was held two weeks prior in Yap on the island of Woleai. The FSM president was in attendance as well as other officials from China.

Brinkman said yes.

Guthertz asked if the U.S. State Department was aware that a high school graduation for the island of Woleai was held and officials from China were in attendance and no representative of the U.S. government attended. This is a major event to occur on the remote island of Woleai, Yap.

Brinkman said no.

Guthertz said one of the key concerns in Guam is China moving into the region, specifically the island of Woleai, Yap, and that the United States government is not acting aggressively to counter this issue, and no inquiry to the FSM government who supposedly have an agreement with the U.S. for U.S. assistance on military needs. The CNMI residents are also concerned due to the military buildup in Guam and the CNMI. China used economics, funding, assistance, social welfare help and are now using infrastructure construction of facilities that can be used by their military officials in the region. Guthertz said she wants to bring this issue to the attention of the U.S. State Department so that actions can be taken to ensure the people of Guam and the CNMI that despite the military buildup in both territories, this issue will be dealt with. Guthertz said the U.S. State Department needs to challenge the leadership in the FSM government.

Igisomar asked for a follow-up on his commission application for the North Pacific Fisheries Commission.

Brinkman said there is no pending action in the U.S. State Department. In order for any action to be taken on the Council's nomination, the U.S. State Department needs something from NOAA to trigger the consideration of the appointment or designation. It's an alternate appointment.

Simonds said the request is an old request submitted by the Council.

Brinkman acknowledged the request.

Simonds asked for clarification as to the appointment being hung up in NOAA NMFS or NOAA.

Brinkman said the U.S. State Department will not act on a designation absent a request from NOAA on this Commissioner designation.

Simonds said the Council will follow up as she is surprised the appointment from the Council has not moved up the chain.

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

Raynal, aquatic ecosystem biologist with the Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, provided the USFWS report. Brian Peck has retired from the USFWS, and Raynal replaced him

as the USFWS nonvoting Council member. Raynal worked and lived in American Samoa for four years and is currently regularly working in Guam, the CNMI, American Samoa, Wake, Marshall Islands and Palmyra.

USFWS issued two permits for research in the PIHMNM. The first permit was issued for a project for the University of Hawai‘i to tag and release bigeye, skipjack and yellowfin tuna around fish aggregating devices (FADs) in the Howland Island, Baker Island, Jarvis Island, Palmyra Atoll and Kingman Reef from June to August 2025. This research will be based aboard the U.S.-flagged vessel, F/V *Gutsy Lady*. The second permit was issued to the Ocean Exploration Trust exploring and mapping Wake Atoll, and work will be based on the E/V *Nautilus* from August to September 2025.

Raynal highlighted updates from the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument (MTMNM). The contact station is undergoing improvements including an exterior mural depicting the shallow open water and deep-sea organisms and habitats in the monument. The interior walls have been updated with information and pictures about the monument, and staff continue to conduct educational and outreach activities with visitors and students, and outreach events in the schools and community. The current Marianas Trench Monument Advisory Council has Rosemary Camacho, CNMI chair, Zabrina Shai, vice chair, Frank Rabauliman, Maile Norman from USCG and Mark Cruz from the Department of Defense (DOD). The advisory council voted to include representatives from Guam, and Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero nominated Austin Shelton, with Quentin Clynton Ridgell as an alternative. The nomination is with the U.S. White House Liaison for review and approval. DOD’s nomination, Rear Admiral Brent DeVore is also in review and awaiting approval, in the meantime, Mark Cruz will continue to serve as the delegated DOD representative. Floyd Masga, Richard Salas and Chris Concepcion have left the CNMI government and are no longer serving; therefore, Camacho and Shai have moved up from alternate members to primary members. The monument continues to implement the strategies and actions from their management plan.

Sword acknowledged and thanked Peck for his great service especially his community commitment in American Samoa.

Simonds said after 16 years, the MTMNM is being managed, showing how the government operates for a length of time after establishing the monument.

G. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management

Douglas Boren, Pacific regional director for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) provided an update on the BOEM program and its mission. BOEM is a small agency and one of the 11 Bureau of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) with about 550 people. It manages the development of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) energy, mineral and geological resources in an environmentally and economically responsible manner. BOEM manages almost 3.2 billion acres of the U.S. OCS off the East Coast, West Coast, Gulf of America Coast, Alaska Region and the territories. BOEM in the Pacific Region manages all submerged lands lying beneath the ocean within the U.S. EEZ beyond coastal waters off California, Oregon, Washington and Hawai‘i, roughly three nm from the coastline to approximately 200 nm offshore. BOEM recently received jurisdiction over the U.S. territories from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022. BOEM works closely with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to advance the understanding and assessment of the critical mineral in the Pacific OCS.

Boren highlighted Seabed minerals and defined them as mineral deposits that contain critical minerals located on the seafloor. Polymetallic nodules found between 3,500 to 6,000 meters below sea level are the focus of BOEM in the Pacific Region. Other minerals such as cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts found 400 to 7,000 meters deep, polymetallic sulfide deposits found 100 to 7,000 meters deep, heavy mineral sands and phosphate found near shoreline, are all minerals found in the deep waters.

BOEM's regulations contain three parts. The first is 30 CFR 580, Prospecting/Scientific Research for Minerals, refers to the prospecting or scientific survey work for potential marine minerals. Often the bureau submits a verification request to the agencies/companies that want to conduct scientific research. The second is 30 CFR 581, Leasing of Minerals, focused on the leasing process consisting of two components: the sale and the lease administration. The third is 30 CFR 582, Operations, which focuses on the process after a lease is issued. Upon issuing a lease, the lessee is required to submit certain plans that would go through the process of review, and BOEM would either approve these plans or approve them with modifications or deny the plans overall. This stage can have the potential of having three separate plans that follow the lease sale: the delineation, testing and mining plans.

BOEM received an unsolicited request April 8, 2025, from a U.S.-based company called Impossible Metals for a competitive lease sale. DOI announced May 20, 2025, the initiation of the process to evaluate a potential mineral lease sale in the waters offshore American Samoa. BOEM is currently developing the *Federal Register* notice which starts the process consisting of putting out a Request for Information (RFI) that's available from the public, commercial fishing industry and any other agencies. The important part of the RFI process is the interest in the leasing. After the RFI process, BOEM will be reviewing and evaluating the comments and information obtained. Based on the information obtained, BOEM will then identify the potential lease area location. Once the lease area is identified, BOEM will conduct the first National Environmental Policy Act review. This is the process for the lease sale and potential survey work required as a lessee to develop plans that will go through the ESA section 7 consultation, and coastal zone process with American Samoa. The next step would be the proposed leasing notice, which would be a draft lease in the lease that is published in the *Federal Register* for public comments 60 days prior to the lease notice. The lease notice is the bidding mechanism, auction details that are public in the *Federal Register* at least 30 days prior to sale. The Competitive Lease Sale is the final stage in the lease process.

Boren highlighted its robust Pacific Region environmental science program and how it backs up the decisions made. Since 1973, BOEM has funded more than 330 Pacific Region environmental science research projects valued at more than \$150 million dollars. BOEM is currently managing 30 environmental projects valued at over \$34 million dollars as of April 2025. Each year, BOEM has an annual cycle to develop studies to make sure to have the studies that are pertinent to where things are at. In 2024, BOEM's main priority was not that of seabed minerals on American Samoa, but has now become the priority of BOEM in 2025. Funds are being directed to begin receiving answers to potential questions from American Samoa.

BOEM, in two E/V *Nautilus* expeditions minorly funded to receive images of the seafloor offshore American Samoa and offshore Guam and the CNMI. AUV *Sentry* occurred offshore in American Samoa September 2024, and AUV *Orpheus* occurred offshore Guam and the CNMI May 2025. BOEM is looking to acquire and synthesize the data to identify the traditional culturally used areas, generalized account of fishing grounds and the cultural importance of those grounds, to ensure all are considered. A Maritime Heritage of the U.S. Pacific Islands study led

by East Carolina University conducted studies in Guam and the CNMI, and will most likely be in American Samoa to discuss the process in September 2025.

A Characterization of Water Column Habitats study led by the University of Alaska-Fairbanks focused on opportunistic collection of baseline mid-water data. The next field effort associated with the mid-water study is a USGS-led cruise for a geological and biological mapping in the extreme southern extent of the Hawai'i OCS.

In partnership with PIFSC, BOEM found funding for 2025 to develop a study to understand what the potential impacts are of seabed mining if it were to move forward on all fisheries in the Pacific Territories, specifically the tuna fishery in American Samoa. This being its first study has BOEM prioritizing this study to develop additional studies as needed so that the knowledge gaps are filled, and well-informed decisions are made.

EO 14285, "Unleashing America's Offshore Critical Minerals and Resources," has tasked the federal partners at NOAA with developing a mapping plan. In collaboration with the USGS, BOEM has been talking with NOAA to develop a rational study on possible locations to search for critical minerals. In partnership with NOAA and USGS, BOEM is planning various deepwater geological mapping efforts.

Muña asked if there are any data from the water column research and how it corresponds with the Fukushima, Japan radiation study on the water column.

Boren said no data has come out of the water column study off the southern portion of the OCS off Hawai'i where data are to be collected. He said he is unfamiliar with the Japanese study, but subject matter experts can take a look at that. As BOEM collects more data off the southern portion of the OCS of Hawai'i, it focuses on how that effort can be extended to American Samoa, Guam or the CNMI. Everything will be taken into consideration.

Muña asked if a timeframe is available for what to expect, as she is sure American Samoa is eager to move forward with whatever opportunities are presented in their area. She asked how the timeline will align with the collection of data, and the synthesizing of the collected data.

Boren said the studies program is an annual cycle which usually takes a couple of years to obtain data once a study is underway. As an example, Boren said if BOEM has a lease sale off American Samoa and additional data are needed, there will be a lessee who will have to pay for that study and collect the data, and all data and information are needed to evaluate a plan.

Muña asked whether a report of the study that was done between Guam and the CNMI is available, or if the study is still ongoing.

Boren said this study is still ongoing.

Ramsey asked about the characterization of the water column habitats off of the southern extent of the Hawai'i OCS, and if a timeline is available for when deep-sea mining could occur. He asked if there are any interests or prospects for Hawai'i.

Boren said Hawai'i is a vessel for opportunistically gathering water column data, as no boats are available. They hope the water column data are transferable to other areas, but the study is not an indication of BOEM's thinking on potential leasing offshore Hawai'i for critical minerals. BOEM obtained water column data from a vessel that was in the area as it needed data in the Pacific. He said there is no indication as to the next steps and the direction in Hawai'i.

Ramsey asked for confirmation that the study is an opportunity to do research and not an indication of any interest to do mining in the area.

Boren confirmed.

Sword asked how far back does each study in the U.S. EEZ, U.S. territories, and the Pacific OCS go in finding potential areas for sea-bed mining.

Boren said the question would be better answered by USGS as they are the developers of these studies. The USGS has spent about 15 years looking at the potential areas for critical minerals. The Pacific Office reviewed the conditions as a modeling effort on where critical minerals are. Boren said he will get back to the Council on when and how long USGS has been doing this.

Sword said USGS works in collaboration with partners to find water resources underground, also at times are used in the islands, and other times are wrong. Sword asked how confident is BOEM with this particular mapping sequence.

Boren said he does not want to speak for USGS, but with the two autonomous underwater vehicle studies conducted in American Samoa, Guam and the CNMI, have resulted in finding nodules in these areas.

Soliai asked if the United States has any interest in exploring in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone.

Boren said BOEM's jurisdiction ends at 200 nm, but as part of the EO, NOAA is able to conduct the permitting process in the high seas. He thinks there are U.S. companies interested in potential mining in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone.

Soliai said the issuing of the EO created local concerns with respect to the ocean environment and the impacts to the ecosystems. In a letter to the Secretary of the Interior, the governor of American Samoa expressed his concerns especially the impact to the tuna fisheries. Judging by the presentation of the engagement of the local community and stakeholders in the RFI process, Soliai asked how soon BOEM anticipates the local engagement to begin.

Boren said BOEM needs to have a couple more meetings with the Governor's Office to decide what the engagement process will look like. The Pacific Region is preparing for what that may look like. He said if there is another meeting associated with the Council in American Samoa, BOEM may be able to come out for that meeting. Boren said BOEM is ready to start the engagement process soon.

Soliai said REAC meetings are scheduled in American Samoa, June 30, 2025, so it will be helpful for BOEM representatives to participate. A petition that's been circulating has been sent to the Council with a letter. The Cook Islands is probably nearing the extraction process then American Samoa, but a concern lies in the extraction process. American Samoa stands to learn from the Cook Islands extraction once it starts. He said BOEM's studies should include the impacts from extraction of the area since it is adjacent to the border area with Cook Islands. Soliai said this should be a recommendation by the Council to BOEM to include in the study.

Sword asked if BOEM is intending community outreach to occur well before any contract signing or lease is done.

Boren said BOEM will be holding community outreach in advance of any scheduled contact signing.

Sword said the community outreach is important to have a better understanding of the ramifications, the benefits, pros and cons and how it can affect the economy because American Samoa has always been a one industry economy. The question remains at what cost to American Samoa. It will be important to help everyone understand the technology and how it may benefit them and their families and the future. Everyone understands national security, but the families and the people must be taken care of when these types of topics arise. Sword thanked Boren for the presentation and for attending the meeting as it starts the dialogue.

Igisomar asked in relation to the map shown of the nodules located in American Samoa, if there is also a map of nodules in the CNMI and Guam, and where one can be found along with reports.

Boren said the map shown is an interactive map that USGS created, which is now a part of the regional map. American Samoa's location was focused on due to the report, but BOEM and USGS has an interactive map that can be found on the BOEM website. In addressing Sword's comment and question, Boren said this being his second meeting in 10 years, hopes to engage more with the Council. Boren acknowledged BOEM making sure that everything in relation to potential for critical mineral mining are evaluated carefully as American Samoa's tuna fishing and tuna cannery are important.

Muña asked in relation to the water column research whether BOEM is aware of any existing research that may have been conducted by any other organization.

Boren said he is aware of a previous study and is not sure of the details, but there are subject matter experts that do these. He has been told of another study on potential water column and potential mining in the area, which is something the BOEM team is looking at to see if any data and information are helpful and how BOEM may use this to revise the information at hand.

Muña asked for BOEM to share that information and report on that research with the Council.

Boren said he will share that information and report with the Council.

H. Public Comment

Utumapu Andrew Pati Ah Young, Director of Discovery Biology at a biotechnology company in San Francisco, an American Samoa and U.S. citizen, commented on the Impossible Metals lease request in American Samoa waters. Young expressed his opposition to the lease request, noting that it is not a resistance to clean energy and economic progress but grounded on science, cultural responsibility and historical lessons. Scientific studies show deep-sea mining causing serious often irreversible harm to the marine ecosystems. Young highlighted a few studies such as the 2020 Japanese study that found a 43% drop in fish density from sediment plumes. In the United States, the Blake Plateau remains unrecovered 44 years after test mining, which has prompted a moratorium through 2032. Experts have testified before the Congress this year of the deep-sea mining plumes and unknown long-term impacts that can devastate biodiversity well beyond dedicated mining zones. Economically, the consequence of short-term extractions like Nauru are visible where unregulated mining has left the land uninhabitable and in an economic collapse. Young said we must not trade long-term sustainability for speculative

economic growth. Culturally, the ocean is not a resource to exploit, rather it is a part of American Samoa's fa'asinomaga, or identity as Samoans. The ancestral practice of Fa'asao or conservation is incompatible with destructive commercial mining. To proceed without understanding the consequences, completely severs American Samoa and its future generations' connection to the ocean. 600 individuals and 40 plus organizations in American Samoa have signed a petition opposing deep-sea mining. Former American Samoa governors, current members of the American Samoa Fono and many prominent community leaders have taken a unifying position against deep-sea mining. Former governor of American Samoa, Lemanu Peleti Mauga issued an EO in 2024 imposing a moratorium and the people of American Samoa continue to speak with one voice. Globally, over 30 countries and multiple states including Hawai'i have enacted bans or moratoriums. Young urged the Council to reject the lease or permit applications for sea-bed mining in the American Samoa EEZ, uphold the moratorium enacted in 2024, and ensure that BOEM and the DOI fully consult with the people and government of American Samoa so that science, culture and ecological stewardship are honored. American Samoa ocean is not for sale, as it is their fa'asinomaga.

I. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding deep-sea mining, the Council:

- 1. Requested BOEM to include information on the extraction procedures in the Cook Islands in its analyses of the impacts of deep-sea mining in the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.

Motion passed.

Regarding North Pacific Fisheries Commission, the Council:

- 2. Directed staff to inquire with NOAA on the status of its previous request for a Council member designation as a commissioner to the North Pacific Fisheries Commission.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

VI. Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items

There were no public comments for non-agenda items.

VII. Pelagics and International

A. 2024 Pelagic Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report

Thomas Remington, Lynker, presented on non-longline fishery performance portion of the 2024 Pelagic Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report. The MHI troll fishery, the MHI handline fishery and the offshore handline fishery primarily catch yellowfin tuna, skipjack tuna, mahimahi, ono, striped marlin and blue marlin. From 2023 to 2024, there was a decrease in catch by the troll fishery by about 300,000 pounds, and nominal revenue also dropped by about \$2 million. This is largely attributable to the decreased average fish price per pound of about \$0.50 per pound from \$4.32 to \$3.91 per pound. Both handline fisheries also experienced a decline in catch and revenue. Catch for 2024 was combined for

700,000 pounds of catch, worth about \$2.7 million. In the handline fisheries, there was a decrease of about \$0.40 per pound.

The American Samoa troll fishery had low participation from 2019 to 2021, likely due to COVID-19, with a slight increase in 2023. CPUE declined as reported troll hours increased with a relatively consistent catch of about 5,000 pounds from 2023 and 2024.

In CNMI, the charter troll fishery has been defunct since COVID-19, with non-charter trips declining since then as well, from 4,000 to 5,000 trips to under 2,000 trips in 2024. 2024 catches were a decadal low of 84,000 pounds, driven by decrease in tuna, mahimahi, and ono but an increase in blue marlin. This recent data could be complicated due to data collection issues and lack of collection during certain months. DFW's creel survey days and creel survey interviews were at an all-time low in 2024, attributable to staffing turnover. CNMI has a mandatory commercial licensing and reporting regulation that is being implemented, which can help commercial reporting.

In Guam, the local troll fishery had relatively consistent trolling trips from 2023 to 2024. That fishery saw a slight decrease of about 2% in total estimated catch to around 700,000 pounds, driven by decreases in skipjack and yellowfin tuna catch. There was an increase for the non-tuna pelagic management unit species, namely mahimahi and blue marlin.

Remington also provided an overview of socioeconomics for the region's pelagic fisheries. Hawai'i saw a decrease in revenue about 4% from the previous year to just over \$100 million due to lower fish prices despite an increase in landings of about 13%. The deep-set longline fishery saw an 11% revenue decline in 2024 and the shallow-set fishery experienced a 37% decline. There was a decrease in costs for deep-set longline trips by 8%. Costs for the shallow-set trips increase by about 3% due to more trip days. American Samoa, and small-boat fisheries in Hawai'i and the territories also experienced revenue declines due to low fish prices.

Remington highlighted protected species updates in the SAFE report. The Plan Team is continuing the annual monitoring of shallow-set longline fishery turtle trip interaction limits, in response to the Council recommendation at the time of final action on Amendment 10 to the Pelagic FEP. There were no shallow-set longline trips that reached the loggerhead or leatherback trip interaction limits in 2024, and leatherback interactions were well below the hard cap. Albatross interactions in the shallow-set longline fishery remained in the expected range in 2024. Observer coverage in the deep-set longline fishery declined to 13% in 2024 and further declined into 2025. The deep-set longline fishery had higher interactions with oceanic whitetip sharks and leatherback sea turtles, but relatively low interactions with albatrosses, which may be attributed to the deep-set vessels fishing further south and the increasing oceanic whitetip shark population. The American Samoa longline fishery observer coverage was at 9.3% in 2024. The American Samoa longline fishery saw a similar increase in oceanic whitetip shark interactions as in the Hawai'i fisheries.

Remington highlighted ecosystem and environmental data from the 2024 Pelagic SAFE Report. Atmospheric carbon dioxide continues to increase to over 425 parts per million, from under 400 a decade ago. Oceanic pH also continued to decline by 12.2% over the last 30 years. 2024 also saw a short El Niño cycle that transitioned to more neutral conditions. The Pelagic SAFE report also tracks bigeye tuna recruitment signals and bigeye and swordfish size class changes through time.

Sakoda asked if there is concern over federal cuts to climate data collection.

Remington said data collection, especially for territories, is expected to continue as normal, but deferred to NMFS.

Littnan said there is a lot of uncertainty around the future of the oceanographic data, noting that all the agencies are responding to budget cuts and reprioritizations. There is discussion in NOAA about what satellite-derived data are going to look like. He said it is currently a wait and see, and the oceanographic data will be part of the reprioritization and reconsideration of how the agency will be able to provide products for everyone that needs them. He said he will keep the Council updated.

Soliai asked how fish prices are determined.

Remington stated that PIFSC analyzes these data to come up with average prices throughout the year.

Soliai said there needs to be continued discussion on this matter.

Jenny Suter, PIFSC Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division, presented the American Samoa and Hawai'i longline fisheries data from the Pelagic SAFE Report. The effort in American Samoa longline fishery has been decreasing over the past 10 years, and the average hook per set has been increasing. In 2024, nine American Samoa longline vessels made 47 trips, with an average of about 3,000 hooks per set. Albacore catch was lowest in 2020 but has been increasing since then, though it remains below the 10-year average. The nominal CPUE for albacore is currently above the 10-year average.

The Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery had 150 active vessels in 2024, consistent with 2023 levels. The deep-set fishery made 1,635 trips, exceeding the 10-year average. Average hooks per set have shown a slight upward trend and consistently above 3,000 hooks per set. Effort has shifted further south, with an increase in yellowfin catch. Bigeye tuna CPUE has declined since 2019 relative to the 10-year average, while yellowfin CPUE has increased since 2020. Quarterly bigeye CPUE has exhibited a continuous decrease across all quarters since 2015, averaging 2.3 fish per hook compared to the 10-year average of 3.5 fish per hook. Changes in bigeye tuna CPUE may be attributed to the use of milkfish bait. Striped marlin catches and CPUE increased in 2024, surpassing the 10-year average. Most other pelagic species have experienced declines in both catch and CPUE during this period, with the exception of ono.

The Hawai'i shallow-set longline fishery had 21 vessels fishing, which was above the 10-year average of 18 vessels. They took 54 trips, which is similar to the average but slightly less than 2023. The average number of hooks per set has been increasing to about 1,400. The fishery fished closer to Hawai'i in 2024 and experienced slight declines in swordfish catch.

Soliai asked for clarification on one of the figures presented.

Suter said the figure shows quarterly CPUE over a 10-year period, with one figure shown for each quarter. This quarterly series is intended to show seasonality in catch more clearly than in the single time series shown in the past.

Soliai said the downward trend shows a bleak picture of a dying fleet.

Muña asked if low production of catch means that more fish are being subject to natural mortality.

T. Todd Jones said he will defer for the PIFSC Life History Program to address that issue and noted that reduced catch could allow for greater future production.

Sword asked how the American Samoa longline catch rates compared to the rest of the WCPFC fleets.

Jones, PIFSC, said the “break-even” CPUE is 12 fish per 1,000 hooks. He indicated that CPUE is much more complex to analyze than using nominal CPUE to discern economic performance.

Sword said performance should be compared with competing fisheries on the outside.

Emily Crigler, PIFSC, said WCPFC reports seem to indicate other fisheries are experiencing the same trend, but this could be addressed with the stock assessment program.

Soliai recommended that the American Samoa CPUE and fishery performance in comparison with WCPFC fisheries be examined to look at how the other fisheries in the Pacific can sustain themselves and flourish while the American Samoa longline fleet is experiencing challenges.

Sword suggested fishery operations also be compared which may affect CPUE.

Crigler said this is something PIFSC could look into with the Pacific Community (SPC).

B. Hawai‘i and American Samoa Longline Fisheries Crew Training Requirement (Final Action)

Lynn Rassel and Jason Mehlinger, PIRO Sustainable Fisheries Division, presented on the Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fishery crew training requirement for Council’s consideration of final action. The Council at the 201st meeting in December 2024 took initial action on the regulatory amendment to implement a crew training requirement. At the 202nd meeting in March 2025, the Council received an update on the refinement of the regulatory approach, status of the pilot training program, and the revised draft reasonable and prudent measure Terms and Conditions. Rassel provided a recap on the background and context for the Council's action, as well as the final revised Terms and Conditions.

Mehlinger provided an update on the status of the pilot training program and plans for the permanent program. To date, 680 individual crew members from 129 vessels have been trained through the monthly, in-person pilot training program initiated in April 2024. The pilot program is now transitioning to the permanent program, which will be conducted as weekly training at the pier, onboard the vessel, or dockside with pre-registration to accommodate vessel arrival and departure schedules . The permanent training program will utilize a video supplemented by supplemental information on good and bad handling examples. An operator-led video training option will provide additional flexibility for crew pickup trips, which will be followed up with a supplemental session with PIRO staff once the vessel is back in port.

Rassel presented the alternatives and associated analysis for Council consideration. Alternative 1 is the action alternative to revise the longline fishery protected species workshop requirement to include crew training, and Alternative 2 is the no-action alternative. The action alternative would amend the regulations under the Pelagic FEP to implement crew training through both a crew certificate requirement and a person-on-deck requirement. Crew members would be required to attend and be certified for completion of protected species handling

training, NMFS would issue a certificate, and the vessel owner or operator would be required to have on board the vessel a valid certificate for one or more crew members while actively fishing. Additionally, at least one trained person must be on deck to direct the proper handling and release when a protected species interaction occurs during fishing gear retrieval. The action alternative aims to fill a clear gap in training, support better outcomes for protected species, and keep the burden on vessels as low as possible. Under the action alternative, the Council was asked to provide direction on sub-alternatives for crew training recertification frequency, with the subalternatives being a 1- or 2-year certification duration or no expiration for the certificate. The action is not expected to affect fishing effort, operations, areas fished, species targeted, or other fishery resources. The action is anticipated to have small but positive improvements in survivorship of protected species. Observer data showing reduced trailing gear on oceanic whitetip sharks in 2024 compared to 2022-2023 suggest the pilot training may have had a positive impact on handling outcomes. The target regulatory effective date is the end of 2025, if the Council takes final action at this meeting. Russel noted that this action has been preliminarily identified as not significant due to its low cost for the purposes of EO 14192.

C. Implementation of Electronic Monitoring in Hawai‘i and American Samoa Longline Fisheries (Final Action)

Mark Fitchett presented on the Council’s final action and draft FEP Amendment to implement EM in the American Samoa and Hawai‘i longline fisheries. Human observer coverage is expected to decline and continue to decline, with uncertainty in the future beyond 2026. NMFS has secured funding to implement EM, including installations of all hardware from 2025 to 2027, with the target for all 150 Hawai‘i and 10 American Samoa longline vessels outfitted with EM by 2027. The goal is to install 50 systems annually in Hawai‘i from 2025-2027 and American Samoa vessels in 2027.

The purpose of implementing EM is to provide a monitoring mechanism that would provide statistically robust estimates of protected species interactions for both the Hawai‘i and American Samoa limited entry longline fisheries. EM could satisfy MSA, MMPA and ESA requirements for monitoring of protected species that are currently satisfied with human observer monitoring. The secondary objective is to provide reliable estimates of bycatch and discards with inclusion of EM as a standardized bycatch reporting mechanism in the Pelagic FEP. The need for EM is to address the decline in human observer coverage, provide an affordable and economically viable monitoring tool, and prevent interruptions to longline fisheries.

The presentation provided two decision points for Council decision: 1) implementation and authorization of EM as monitoring mechanism; and 2) cost allocation. The first decision point was whether to implement EM and how to implement EM, and included alternatives and sub-alternatives on how vessels should be phased into an EM program. The alternatives considered under the first decision point were: 1) take no action and proceed under the status quo; 2) phase in a mandatory requirement of EM in the Hawai‘i and American Samoa limited entry longline fisheries; and 3) implement an optional EM program. Sub-alternatives considered under alternative 2 for how to phase-in EM were: 2a) randomized selection of vessels; 2b) vessels prioritized for a particular section during the phase-in (e.g., shallow-set vessels first); and 2c) priority for voluntary vessels and subsequently random selection. Under both a status quo or optional program, there are concerns with inadequate monitoring which may put the fishery at legal and compliance risk with declining and uncertain observer coverage into the future. Mandatory EM program would ensure all vessels are adequately monitored and with little risk of non-compliance or legal issues.

Fitchett presented the key features for the EM program required for vessels under the action alternatives, exceptions from EM requirements, and NMFS (or NMFS contractor) roles. The EM requirement would apply to large vessels under the American Samoa longline limited access permit and all vessels under the Hawai'i longline limited access permit. All vessels would be required to maintain a vessel monitoring plan (VMP), a signed agreement that outlines where cameras will be, the duties and responsibilities of the vessels at sea. VMPs provide contingencies in case of an EM system malfunction at sea and exceptions in case an EM system is not operable. VMPs could be revised by agreement with NMFS and the operators if changes affect a single vessel. VMP changes that affect multiple vessels could be reviewed by the Council. Vessels will be required to make sure EM systems are on and working, clean camera lens before hauling. Regulations for electronic reporting and human observers would be unaffected under a proposed EM program.

The second decision point was on how the Council may decide that EM will be financially supported into the future. The alternatives considered under the second decision point were: A) federal agency (NMFS) maintain all EM costs; B) cost-sharing with industry assuming a portion of sampling costs through hardware replacement; and C) industry covering all sampling costs. The Council's preliminary preferred alternative is to implement EM with public (NMFS) funding. An EM program for the entire American Samoa and Hawai'i longline fishery would be approximately \$2.5 million a year compared to an observer program that operated at approximately \$7 million a year. Funding for EM remains uncertain beyond 2027. NMFS's cost allocation policy states NMFS will be covering administrative costs, but sampling costs could be shared with industry. The policy indicates that industry would assume sampling costs if EM was initiated by Council action, but that NMFS would cover sampling costs if EM was for legal requirements under the ESA, such as protected species estimation and monitoring.

Fitchett presented a table comparing cost allocation and impacts to the fisheries for alternatives, with substantial impacts to fleet profitability with alternatives that require industry cost coverage. Thirty-eight percent of Hawai'i longline vessels already operate without a profit and 30% of American Samoa longline vessels have been operating without a profit. Economic situation has worsened since these estimates. Under alternative B and C, the Hawai'i longline fisheries are expected to see average vessel profits decline by 7-8% and 27-28% respectively. For American Samoa average profits are expected to decline 12-13% and 25-46% for alternatives B and C.

Malloy asked for further elaboration on how the optional EM program would satisfy the BiOp requirement for a statistically robust observing program.

Fitchett said it is uncertain, but an optional program might not meet some obligations if too few vessels participate.

Soliai asked for clarification whether NMFS would need to decide that EM is a requirement to provide continued funding beyond 2027, and whether NMFS has made that determination.

Fitchett said the determination has not been made yet as that is the decision that the Council will make.

Malloy said the requirement for a statistically robust monitoring program is in the BiOp, which prompts the need for an observer program at large. The Council's decision at this meeting

is to switch the monitoring program from human at-sea monitoring to EM to minimize costs, and to authorize a different method to collect the data that would support the BiOp requirement.

Soliai said the EOs that were issued by the president is to help promote seafood competitiveness and that it would be inconsistent to require industry to pay for EM for the purpose of meeting a legal requirement. Whether it is a human observer program or EM, the mandate comes from the federal government and the Council is now discussing an unfunded mandate, which puts industry in a certain predicament to address and meet these obligations beyond 2027. Soliai said the American Samoa fleet is struggling and operating at about a 50% reduction in the fleet, and the economic situation presented for the Hawai'i longline fleet is also troubling. He said he finds it hard to support having industry pay for something that should be the responsibility of the federal government, and the Council should try to do everything to help sustain and revive the American Samoa longline fleet, rather than adding more nails to the coffin.

Fitchett clarified that the observer program was originally established in the Pelagic FMP through Council action in the early 1990s for the purpose of protected species monitoring, not as a requirement under the BiOp.

Soliai asked if the economic figures on costs of EM and observer coverage were based on 20% deep-set coverage.

Fitchett said the \$7 million for the observer program was based on when there was 20% deep-set coverage and the discretionary 100% in the shallow-set longline fishery. The observer costs declined to about \$4.1 million in late 2024, and will be \$3 million for the next fiscal year.

Soliai said moving to EM would then be considered a substantial savings for NMFS to meet these obligations and perhaps NMFS should continue to fund EM with the money saved. Soliai asked for confirmation that the observer coverage went from 20% to 13% and then to 7% in 2025.

Fitchett confirmed and said it is projected to decline to 5% by the end of fiscal year 2026.

Muña asked whose responsibility it was to establish the observer program if it was initially included in the FEP and later a requirement of the BiOp.

Fitchett said NMFS has been bearing the cost for the human observer program.

Muña asked if this is a voluntary transition to put the responsibility onto the industry.

Fitchett said the Council creates the authority and NMFS does the implementation.

Muña asked, if one of the requirements for the decision on who would be responsible for the costs is that it is economically viable, for whom it would be economically viable.

Fitchett said in this case it is presumed to have cost savings to the agency, which is currently bearing the monitoring costs.

Muña said it does not appear that it would be economically viable to the industry.

Fitchett said would be the case if the monitoring regime changes to require industry to pay.

Muña recalled discussion from the standing committee meeting about requirements that other countries must meet for observer coverage or EM, and asked what the minimum standards are.

Fitchett said there is a minimum 5% at-sea monitoring requirement under the RFMOs. There have not been any rules yet in the RFMOs that would allow EM to supplant human observer coverage. Those foreign countries do not have domestic statutory requirements like the MSA, ESA and the MMPA that the United States has. The United States is also subject to the RFMO's 5% observer coverage as a minimum standard in addition to other domestic monitoring requirements under the ESA and MMPA to monitor those species adequately.

Muña asked if electronic logbooks would be duplicative of EM.

Fitchett said electronic logbooks are a self-reporting mechanism. The logbooks could potentially be used as a verification mechanism for EM and allow some synergy with EM. The logbook data are the primary estimator of retained catch such as tunas and billfish, but not verifiable for things like protected species interactions and bycatch at sea.

Guthertz said she wanted to hear what the fishing community felt about EM and if they can afford it.

Sword said the Hawai'i longline fishery is struggling and the American Samoa longline fishery is in its death throes. He said the fisheries would be shooting itself in the foot by increasing costs, while trying to get away from the 80% fish imports in the United States and increasing production. Fishermen are also facing problems such as crewing and masters training that are detrimental to the industry. The fishery should not have any more unnecessary burden. They are already dealing with trade issues and competing with foreign products and dumping into the U.S. market. The whole idea of this administration is to lower the restrictions on U.S. productivity. He said the Council needs to think twice about what it is doing, and find a way around the problem. A united front is needed in all aspects from the federal government and the private sector.

Weaver said it looks like the industry is dying and there is already very little profit. There is a need to find a solution to keep the longline fisheries in operation

Fitchett said there are also risks for the fishery without EM and sufficient observer coverage. The Council is making two decisions – whether to implement EM and on who should pay for it.

Guthertz said monitoring is a good thing but the burden should be the responsibility of the federal government if it is going to be required to comply with international expectations. Shifting the burden to the fishermen is not right, and she said it would be unfair for the Council to agree to require the fishermen to pay for it.

Malloy said other U.S. fisheries currently pay for their own observer programs, so industry paying for some of the monitoring would not be unprecedented. NMFS will also consider several other considerations in determining the appropriateness of requiring these fisheries to pay for the program, including profitability, as the taxpayers are paying for this service from the fishery. Without EM, NMFS would not be able to continue with the human observer program in a way that allows the fishery to comply with the BiOp under the ESA without some additional funding or some industry support for funding. The focus for the Council

action may be on protected species monitoring, but Malloy wondered why NMFS and the Council would want to be constrained to protected species given that WCPFC envisions an EM program that could be used for various species and activities, and there are scientific needs for the monitoring programs that could be useful.

Fitchett said the intent of the Council is not constraining, but to fulfill the objectives of human observers which was for protected species monitoring. He did not think the Council taking action for the primary objective for protected species monitoring would preclude the use of EM to satisfy requirements through other entities or RFMOs.

Guthertz said the fishing community is in decline and the timing of this would be a terrible burden on them and would make things worse for them.

Sword said NMFS should not be worried about money when it gave \$85 million to the right whales in New England. The burden is unfair to now shift the responsibility to industry. NMFS needs to work harder to find a solution for the problem. Sword asked what NMFS would do if the Council decided not to move forward with EM, and whether NMFS would shut down the fisheries affected.

Malloy said if the fisheries are out of compliance with the BiOp, then they are not covered by the incidental take statement (ITS) that allows the fisheries to take a certain number of species to conduct the fishery. The fisheries would be in violation.

Sword asked if NMFS would then shut down the fishery.

Malloy said has happened in the past, but declined to say what would happen in the future if the observer program went away. She stated all circumstances would be considered in deciding what to do.

Ramsey said he looks forward to advisory group discussions and recommendations and hearing feedback from industry.

Guthertz said the fishery constituents would act negatively toward the Council if it went forward to shift the cost burden to the fishermen.

Simonds stated that it would be most difficult for American Samoa to implement EM as services are not readily available there. Simonds asked if there is another way for American Samoa to deal with requirements. She noted every vessel has logbooks, so there could be another way to achieve objectives if there were not observers or EM in that fishery.

Malloy deferred to Tucher, GCPI, to speak on what would happen if NMFS did not authorize an observer program.

Tucher said this issue is fundamental under the ESA, in that the action is subject to being enjoined by a federal court if an action agency, in this case NMFS, does not adequately monitor its action under the terms of the ITS. NMFS is currently addressing a Freedom of Information Act request asking for documentation on how the agency is monitoring the fisheries, and while NMFS does have monitoring in place, it is getting harder to do. NMFS would not want to be in a position where it is unable to track compliance with the ITS to determine if the fishery is in a jeopardy situation as that could lead to a shut down.

Simonds said the Council, in responding to the EOs, is going to be reviewing some of the measures currently in the BiOps to determine whether they are necessary.

Sword said the challenge for the Council and NMFS will be to determine what would be adequate or inadequate for ensuring compliance, and to find some happy medium.

Sakoda asked what the final decision process would be if the Council makes a recommendation on who covers the cost.

Malloy said this is a decision for NMFS headquarters to take into consideration the Council recommendation and base that on financial allocations it has, which has been the case for the human observer program. NMFS does intend to pay for EM in some regard contingent on funding. There are also regional allocations and congressional allocations as a factor. Part of the reason NMFS wanted to assume the cost of the program for the first three years was to demonstrate success, and allow some of these questions to be discussed through the implementation process and not necessarily decided in advance.

Sakoda said the Council cannot lobby Congress but asked if there would be other avenues such as the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission to lobby for funding.

Simonds said individuals can, but not as representatives of the Council. She agreed the commission could be a good avenue.

Tucher said the restriction for recipients of federal grants is lobbying Congress, in the courts and state legislatures. There is no prohibition on approaching the executive branch and asking for funding. The Council members cannot go to Congress as members of the Council, with some exceptions.

Soliai reminded the Council that EO 14276 on restoring seafood competitiveness also requires the federal government to remove barriers that inhibit progress in fisheries. This is an issue of livelihood and putting food on the table that help support small economies, and the collective wisdom will lead to the solutions to these problems.

D. Management Procedure for South Pacific Albacore

Alex Kahl, PIRO International Fisheries Division, gave a briefing on the process to develop a Management Procedure for South Pacific Albacore. A document showing trends in albacore fisheries was provided to Council members. No work has been done this year so far on the management procedure at WCPFC. The bulk of the work will begin when the Scientific Committee meets in August 2025, where an update to the trends in the South Pacific albacore fishery will be presented. A workshop in September 2025 will be co-chaired by Crigler, the Science Committee chair. The WCPFC tasked itself to adopt both the management procedure and in implementing a management measure for albacore in December 2025.

In the past couple of years, both China and Taiwan have increased their CPUE significantly. Forty-nine percent of albacore catch in the South Pacific has been in the U.S. EEZ around Pacific Islands and 51% on the high seas. The amount of effort on the high seas is significantly less than the amount of effort within the EEZs. American Samoa longliners caught approximately 890 metric tons (mt) in 2023, while neighboring Cook Islands reported several thousand metric tons — the highest catch in EEZs that year. Kahl noted the amount of catch per square kilometer is comparable. There is also a troll fishery for the United States that operates on

high seas off New Zealand. NMFS will invite SPC to provide another briefing in the fall for representatives of the territories and in the United States.

Soliai asked where most Chinese and Taiwan effort is located, noting their increased total effort and CPUE.

Kahl could not speak to location, but said Chinese catch in 2023 was about 26,000 mt, of which 17,000-18,000 mt is on the high seas. Much of that is within the overlap area with IATTC. Their fleet is most active among EEZs in the Cook Islands, roughly 5,000 mt catch.

E. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations

1. Advisory Panels

Gil Kualii, Advisory Panel (AP) Hawai'i vice chair, presented the Hawai'i AP meeting reports and recommendations.

Regarding the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement, the Hawai'i AP recommends alternative 1, subalternative 1b (implement crew training requirement with a 2-year certification duration), which would allow striking a balance between training effectiveness and burden on the fishery.

Kualii reported the decision was simple because the current program has been run so well and presented in a clear fashion.

Regarding the implementation of EM in Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries, the Hawai'i AP recommends alternative 2b to implement a mandatory EM program based on a voluntary program followed by random selection of the remaining vessels from 2025-2027. Further regarding cost allocation, the Hawai'i AP recommends alternative A, to implement EM with public federal (NMFS) funding.

Kualii reported AP decisions on EM were stuck on the cost sharing issues and that the burden should not fall on the fishermen. The AP did not feel as if it would be fair for industry to cover the cost.

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

Regarding the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement, the American Samoa AP recommends alternative 1, subalternative 1b (implement crew training requirement with a 2-year certification duration), noting that some foreign crew members in the American Samoa longline fleet are typically on 2-year contracts.

Regarding EM, the American Samoa AP recommends alternative 2a to implement a mandatory EM program in the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fishery with a random selection of all longline vessels for implementation. Further regarding cost allocation, the American Samoa AP recommends alternative A, to implement EM with public federal (NMFS) funding noting that shared cost allocation would create unnecessary pressure on the fleet as it continues to face economic hardship while the agency has cost savings transitioning from human observers to EM as primary monitoring.

Ilaoa reported the American Samoa AP's discussion reflected the Council's discussion on EM and that no added cost should go to the longline fleet.

2. Plan Team

Crigler, Pelagic Plan Team (PPT) chair, reported on the PPT meeting report and recommendations. The PPT meeting took place in conjunction with the Archipelagic Plan Team (APT) meeting this year. A lot of work was done to collectively revise the annual SAFE reports. Several data modules were reviewed including the fishery performance modules for American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, Hawai'i, and then also the international and protected species modules. There were many storms and high surf advisories and warnings, storm warnings that occurred in 2024 affecting fishing in Guam especially. The Plan Teams also noted decline in human observer coverage in Hawai'i longline fisheries (20% in deep-set to 13%) and 9% in American Samoa longline fishery.

Several work items arose regarding interpreting data in future SAFE reports. There has been an increase in recent years in the number of vessels that are using troll handline gear, which is distinct from the small-boat troll operations. The PPT this year recommended that the authors of the SAFE report work to distinguish between those two sectors. Small-boat fisheries categories in Hawai'i include pole and line fisheries, troll, handline, shortline, and offshore handline fisheries presented difficulties in distinguishing fishery performance from the data because they often switch gears during trips. Because CPUE in the raw data may not reflect performance, the Plan Team recommended authors to remove CPUE from the small-boat section of the SAFE report until further investigation with advisory groups. The Plan Teams will also review ecosystem component species (ECS) lists for pelagic species as well.

Regarding crew training, the PPT supports implementation of the crew training requirement under Alternative 1, and recommends a 2-year certification requirement (Sub-alternative 2), which would reduce burden compared to an annual certification requirement while providing opportunities for refresher training for crew members who stay in the fishery for longer than 2 years. The PPT encourages the crew training program to provide opportunities for more frequent refresher trainings on a voluntary basis.

Regarding EM, the PPT supports authorizing EM as a mandatory monitoring program for Hawai'i and large vessel American Samoa limited-entry fisheries, and recommends implementing EM by randomly selecting vessels (subalternative 2A) during the phase-in period. The PPT notes that random selection is more representative of the fisheries. For American Samoa vessels, the PPT recommends flexibility for those vessels as conducted in electronic reporting implementation, acknowledges possible delay in implementation, and recommends that the American Samoa fleet should be considered separately in the random selection process.

Crigler reported the PPT acknowledged the unique challenges for American Samoa and that there may be a delay in implementation in American Samoa. Thus, the American Samoa selection of vessels may be different than Hawai'i in the random selection process.

3. Social Science Planning Committee

Craig Severance, Social Science Planning Committee (SSPC) chair, reported on the SSPC meeting report and recommendations.

Regarding the crew training action item, the SSPC recommends the Council consider a 2-year expiration for the crew training certificates, noting social science research on short-lived effects of training programs especially for rare events while balancing the retraining burden if the majority of the crew turn over within about 2 years. Having a 2-year expiration would help ensure crew that return to the fishery at a later time to be retrained with the latest information.

Regarding the EM action item, the SSPC recommends the Council consider the following socioeconomic factors:

- Approach for prioritization would depend on the objectives - if the objective is broad-scale adoption, priority should be placed on having fishermen who are respected within the fleet (noting community development theory, diffusion of innovation theory, and adoption of innovation guidelines); if objective is representativeness of the fleet, a different approach would be taken;
- Consider testing implementation through the DSLL sector, where there is greater flexibility for observer coverage rate to work out the details as a way to address concerns about the implementation being top-down associated with possible loss of revenue;
- Consider industry's priorities more broadly to get a better perspective of how the action may affect different segments more acutely (e.g., ownership groups, such as owner-operators vs. hired captain; single proprietor vs. multiple vessel owners);
- Note potential unfairness with the \$7 million observer program that industry did not have to pay, but a \$2.5 million program where the fishermen may now need to pay, with NMFS experiencing a cost-savings.

Severance reported the Hawaii Longline Association supports EM and therefore the SSPC took that into consideration and that the cost-earning data may have been lost with reduction in human observer coverage.

4. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee

Michael Goto, Fishing Industry Advisory Committee (FIAC) chair, presented the report and recommendations. Goto reported there was spirited conversation from Hawai'i and American Samoa members of the FIAC on the action items. Goto also discussed three bills in the Hawai'i State legislative process. One was an 'ahi labeling bill, which sought to create a state regulated law that would require all retail vendors of 'ahi products to label country of origin. It had a loophole initially that ended federal requirements once 'ahi products were mixed or processed. It met with zero opposition in the legislature. Consumer knowledge of local versus foreign products is important. Hawai'i and American Samoa fisheries also need to retain their local fishing culture.

Regarding the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries crew training requirement, the FIAC recommends alternative 1, subalternative 1b (implement crew training requirement for the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries, with a 2-year certification duration). The 2-year certification duration would be less burdensome than an annual certification while providing opportunities for retraining for crew members who remain in the fishery for longer than two years.

Regarding the implementation of EM in Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries, the FIAC recommends alternative 2, subalternative 2A to phase in mandatory requirement of

EM, with a random assignment of EM placement on applicable vessels. The FIAC further recommends alternative A, to implement EM with federal government covering all costs. The FIAC notes that the draft VMP appended to the draft FEP amendment should be considered an example at this time, and recommends that the Council and NMFS work with Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fishery to ensure the requirements within VMPs are appropriate and practical for these fisheries.

The FIAC recommends that outreach, “EM 101,” be conducted expeditiously before any implementation.

5. Scientific and Statistical Committee

Lynch, SSC chair, presented the report and recommendations.

Lynch reported the SSC discussion on EM raised economic concerns. Lynch also stated the SSC has attempted over the last year to improve its approach to evaluating issues to help provide better input from the SSC for Council decisions. A number of members have recently turned over with new members joining the SSC, including a preeminent economist.

The SSC attempted to evaluate the economic impacts of the various options on EM. The materials have some tables in them that provide some alternatives in terms of whether to require voluntary implementation or mandatory, and if mandatory, whether a targeted, randomized or voluntary approach would be appropriate for economic purposes.

Regarding the implementation of EM in Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries, the SSC recommends the Council:

- Implement EM as a mandatory monitoring mechanism (alternative 2) for estimating protected species bycatch and all statutory monitoring requirements. The SSC showed a general preference to implement the proposed mandatory EM scheme with random assignment of EM placement on the Hawai‘i-based and American Samoa longline fleets (subalternative 2A);
- Ensure that affected fishery participants receive appropriate outreach well in advance of implementation. While the SSC generally acknowledges random assignment of EM to selected vessels would generate more representative data, there are concerns that such an approach might nonetheless foster a negative “top-down” perception among fishery participants;
- Request NMFS implement the proposed EM program using public federal funding and not impose EM costs on the fishing industry.

Lynch said the SSC is doing its best to integrate economics, and science and data quality issues in making recommendations and suggested members review the SSC report and materials.

6. Pelagic and International Standing Committee

Perez reported on the Pelagic and International Standing Committee recommendations.

Regarding EM, the standing committee recommends the Council:

- Implement EM as a mandatory monitoring mechanism for Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline vessels, phasing in vessels randomly during NMFS-supported implementation from 2025-2027;
- Recommend that EM costs be continually covered by NMFS beyond the phase-in period, noting NMFS covers the cost of human observers which share the same purpose for monitoring of protected species;
- Recommends that NMFS update cost-earnings survey information for the American Samoa longline fishery as soon as possible, to reflect recent changes to the fishery and any impacts that EM cost-sharing may have on the struggling fishery.

F. Public Comment

Ilaoa provided public comment on the performance of American Samoa longline fisheries. Despite a slight CPUE increase for the American Samoa fleet, the situation is still dire. Decreases in landings, revenues, and fish prices continue the alarming trend of decline for the fleet. As a small business owner, Ilaoa proposed that NMFS, in its review of the monuments as directed under the recent EO, allow the American Samoa longline fleet to fish seaward of 12 nm around Rose Atoll Marine National Monument. This still provides plenty of protection for the reefs. It is possible to support the fisheries and also continue conservation efforts. Ilaoa said additional costs for the fishery taking EM costs are not ideal and the agency should cover the cost. While Malloy pointed out some industries pay for EM, the situation in American Samoa is very different. Other parts of the country were not forced to carry over 99% of all the Marine National Monuments and large marine closures to commercial fishing, which is a disproportionate burden that has impacted this region's commercial fleets. In 1900, the United States made a promise to protect American Samoa lands and waters as well as the interests of American Samoans. Not further crippling the American Samoa fleet would be a commitment to the well-being of the American Samoa community.

Eric Kingma, Hawaii Longline Association, commented on crew training and EM. Kingma commended Mehlinger and his colleagues for organizing crew training. Kingma thanked PIFSC and PIRO for providing funding for EM initially. Kingma also thanked advisory group members for their input in recognizing the burden that the fishing industries have been facing, as well as the tough economic and market conditions, and the regulatory environment as the HLA is facing unprecedented challenges in the market. Kingma said Alaska profitability went down 50% and it was felt globally. The HLA still supports EM moving into a mandatory direction, but the agency should pay for it. Kingma noted the U.S. does not subsidize fisheries much while giving \$20 billion in subsidies for agriculture, and said paying for EM is not a harmful subsidy. The next step for EM is working with the fishermen, owners, and industry on what requirements for EM may be. HLA will continue to be a partner in that.

Joe Hamby, Cape Fisheries and American Samoa AP member, provided public comments on the America First Seafood Strategy. This represents a great opportunity to put forward some specific suggestions to NOAA and ask them to forward them to the appropriate agency in Washington, DC. Fisheries are declining in the United States because they are faced with competition from entities that use forced labor, have subsidized operations for fishing or in processing, and have less regulated fleets. The U.S. fishing industry is competing on an uneven playing field. There are also issues with the USTR and tariffs, including unintended consequences on tariffs on tuna loins, including job loss in American Samoa. This administration may correct some of these unintended consequences. Allowing an American Samoa-based tuna

purse seine fleet to be regulated by American Samoa is an opportunity to deregulate, which can be done by acknowledging them as a Small Islands Developing State fleet under the WCPFC and affording them the same exemptions and privileges as the competitors. All of these issues affect food security for American Samoa.

G. Council Discussion and Action

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

- 1. Recommended as final action a regulatory amendment to revise the protected species workshop requirement for vessels registered for use under any longline permit to implement crew training as described in alternative 1, subalternative 1b, as follows:**
 - a. A crew certification requirement that, in addition to the existing operator requirement, would require a minimum of 1 crew per vessel be certified, NMFS issue a certificate of completion with a 2-year expiration, and require a minimum of one valid crew certificate onboard; and**
 - b. A person-on-deck requirement that would require at least one trained person to be on deck to direct the proper handling and release when a protected species interaction occurs during fishing gear retrieval.**

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 Perez.
Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

Regarding EM, the Council:

- 2. Recommended as final action an amendment to the Pelagic FEP, to authorize EM as a monitoring mechanism on Western Pacific longline vessels that possess a Hawai‘i limited-entry permit or a large vessel American Samoa limited-entry permit, for the purpose of at-sea monitoring and data collection. The primary objective of implementing EM is to provide reliable estimates of protected species interactions and other lawful purposes. Specifically, the Council recommends that the amendment:**
 - a. Implement a mandatory EM program for vessels operating under a Hawai‘i limited entry permit or a large vessel American Samoa limited entry permit;**
 - b. Require applicable vessels to carry NMFS-certified EM systems on the vessel when fishing under the applicable permit;**
 - c. Require vessels that have EM systems installed to maintain a VMP onboard and maintain the EM systems under provisions outlined in the VMP;**
 - d. Include a process to revise VMP requirements when those changes would apply to more than one applicable vessels;**

- e. **Include exemptions for vessels where operators of applicable vessels have provided appropriate notification of malfunction or damage, as provided in the VMP, and have not had a resolution provided within 72 hours of that notification, have been provided an exemption by the Regional Administrator, or have a human observer onboard;**
- f. **Identify EM as a Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology for the Hawai'i longline fishery and large vessels in the American Samoa longline fishery.**

The Council further recommended that the EM program:

- g. **Be phased in with random selection of eligible vessels during 2025 to 2027;**
- h. **Be fully funded (administrative and sampling costs) by NMFS, noting the primary objective of EM is for monitoring protected species under the ESA and MMPA, and noting cost-savings to NMFS as monitoring coverage predominantly shifts from a NMFS-funded human observer program to EM;**
- i. **In the event NMFS funding is unavailable, that the Council and NMFS will review other adequate monitoring alternatives.**

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.

Simonds asked GCPI if there is language that could be included that NMFS could provide alternative monitoring if EM is unable to be implemented in American Samoa and while human observer program declines.

Tucher said the Council needs to express that in a paragraph to explore other opportunities or options for economical or more cost-effective data collection.

Simonds said this action depends on the fishermen, and that there are protections in place in case EM cannot be used due to costs.

Tucher said concerns about cost should also be stated, and advised that the Council needs to be deliberate in its recommendation.

Paragraph (i) was added to the motion without objection.

Sword asked to clarify that if they report problems with EM, that they have 72 hours to get an exemption to continue fishing.

Fitchett clarified that in the paragraph, vessels have 72 hours to allow the problem to be resolved but can still go fishing after that period, regardless if successfully fixed.

Simonds stated this can be dealt with in the VMP.

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

3. **Directed staff to work with NMFS and the Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries to conduct a workshop on VMPs to ensure they are appropriate and practical for these fisheries to improve efficiency of an EM program and reduce burdens to vessel operations.**
4. **Recommended NMFS expeditiously conduct outreach to Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries, “EM 101,” prior to any implementation activities.**
5. **Recommended NMFS update cost-earnings survey information for American Samoa longline fisheries as soon as possible to discern any impacts EM may have on the fishery.**

Malloy asked if the recommendation on VMP workshop was for improving their efficiencies.

Fitchett said recommendation came from the FIAC and was intended to ensure they are appropriate and practical.

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Igisomar.
Motion passed.

Regarding longline fishery performance, the Council:

6. **Requested NMFS provide the Council with an evaluation of how Hawai‘i and American Samoa longline fisheries are performing relative to competing foreign fisheries within the WCPFC, including CPUE and market conditions (e.g., price and trends).**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.
Motion passed.

VIII. Hawai‘i Archipelago and Pacific Remote Island Areas

A. Moku Pepa

Ramsey reported House Bill 534, also known as the ‘ahi labeling bill, has been approved by the Hawai‘i Legislature to expand the country of origin labeling regulations. This bill will go into effect July 1, 2026. He said summer is a great time for fishing in Hawai‘i, as it coincides with the peak season for baitfish and the Tokunaga Ulua Tournament, the largest shoreline fishing tournament in Hawai‘i, was held with 765 participants. Of the fish that were caught, 82 were released. This tournament attracts participants from around the State and generates a significant amount of revenue through fishers shipping their trucks, buying fishing gear, and purchasing food for the week. Many families entered the tournament, showcasing that fishers were having a good time fishing with their friends and family. There were two ulua that weighed more than 100 pounds, and the third-place fish weighed 99.9 pounds. Also, an invasive species tournament was held in Kealakekua Bay on the island of Hawai‘i, hosted by the State of Hawai‘i, various community groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with the goal of removing invasive species from the marine protected area. This tournament was invite-only for

50 spearfishers, who removed approximately 530 invasive fish, equating to about 960 pounds. The fish did not go to waste and was used for different purposes.

Guthertz asked how these fish were a problem.

Ramsey said the fish targeted in the tournament were invasive and prolific spawners. These species are also known to have ciguatera. The State of Hawai'i previously introduced the species to fill a niche in the fishery, but it became invasive to the local fish population.

Ramsey said the Hawai'i Marlin Tournament Series began with the Lazy Marlin Tournament, with 13 boats tagging and releasing 42 blue marlin and two striped marlin. There were notable catches in the reporting period that included an 8.9-pound humpback red snapper (*Lutjanus gibbus*) shot by Kevin Sakuda, a double marlin strike off a kayak from Gerald Mina, and a potential state record 13-pound alfonsin caught by Layne Nakagawa. In addition, Ed Watamura, Itano, and Phil Fernandez caught a notable *hapu 'upu 'u* (grouper) that was provided to PIFSC to assist with understanding its life history.

Muña asked for clarification on the trash categories for the different fishing tournaments.

Ramsey said tournament coordinators have included a trash category that could be used to enter different raffles, increasing the chances of winning a prize.

Weaver said the tournaments he holds in Saipan have a similar category, which he credited to Kualī'i.

Itibus asked how the Marlin Tournament Series determines the weight of fish that have been caught and released.

Ramsey said he should ask a charter fisherman, since the tournaments have a lot of catch-and-release.

B. Division of Aquatic Resources Report

Bryan Ishida, Hawai'i DLNR Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR), presented the agency report for February to April 2025. From September 2024 to April 2025, 309 deep seven commercial marine license (CML) holders made 1,488 trips and reported 140,075 pounds in mixed deep-seven species catch. In December 2024, the agency saw the highest catch of deep-seven species since December 2017. For the current fishing year, *onaga* (longtail red snapper) 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 17 CML holders making 58 trips and reporting landings of 3,557 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. The allowance of females caused quite the buzz in 2024, and they expect the Kona crab catch may break the 5,000- or 6,000-pound mark for the 2025 fishing year.

For the 2024 uku (green jobfish) season, there were 130 CML holders making 320 trips and reporting landings of 22,079 pounds. During the reporting period, the catch exceeded the average of the previous five years, with the highest landings in the past five years. They noticed highliners returned to the fishery, and some were targeting Penguin Bank. This may be correlated

with the strong prices for uku, and the market indicators could be the drivers for whether there will be a higher or lower catch.

In 2025, 968 CMLs were issued, generating a revenue of \$127,550. In the first month of issuing the commercial marine vessel license (CMVL), there were 22 longline and seven non-longline CMVLs issued for \$41,100 in revenue.

Six permits for the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument were issued. One for conservation and management, two for research, two for Native Hawaiian practices and one special ocean use permit. There is one special ocean use permit under review. In March, there was an incident where a vessel was observed tied up to a FAD. The contractor is working to replace the missing FADs previously reported.

The Aquatic Invasive Species Management Program continues to monitor the invasive anemone, *Anemonia majano*, in Kaneohe Bay. The DAR Aquatic Invasive Species team is collaborating with stakeholders and communities to develop a plan for removal and eradication. Education method trials have concluded. This included tarping, smothering, and testing chlorine on the invasive species. Based on the results, they found that chlorine was the most effective, and epoxy smothering was not effective.

Gov. Green appointed two interim commissioners to the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, which includes Fernandez and Kualī'i. They are both pending State confirmation at the next legislative session and will be joined by BLNR Chair Dawn Chang or her designated representative at the next meeting.

On May 7, Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement (DOCARE) officers seized a fishing vessel for use of longline gear approximately seven miles off West Hawai'i. Use of longline gear within 75 miles of the coastline is prohibited by state and federal laws without a federal limited-entry permit. The media misstated that shortline fishing is allowed if the line is less than one mile, and the violation was associated with the location of their activity.

There has been a series of lawsuits involving the commercial aquarium fishery that presented a potential threat to all commercial fishing pursuant to CMLs, which they found to be subject to Hawai'i Environmental Policy Act (HEPA) review. During the 2025 legislative session, multiple bills were introduced to preempt the shutdown of commercial fishing in the event of an unfavorable ruling. House Bill 123 and Senate Bill 22 propose exempting actions involving the operation and management of fisheries in the State from environmental review requirements. House Bill 661 and Senate Bill 1074 proposed to allow previously authorized activities to continue during the environmental review process if HEPA is found to apply. Neither set of bills passed the 2025 legislative session. The State is currently reviewing its HEPA exemption list to determine whether commercial fishing activity could be declared exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement (EIS) if it is determined that HEPA applies to CMLs.

Muña asked if there was a specific cost for the CMVL to generate the \$41,000 in revenue.

Ishida said there are two types of CMVLs, which include longline and nonlongline. If the vessel is under 22 feet in length, then the CMVL would cost \$100. If the vessel is over 22 feet in length, then the CMVL would be \$200. If it is a longline CMVL, the cost would be \$1,500.

Soliai asked about the cost of a CML.

Ishida stated that the annual fee is \$100 for residents and \$250 for nonresidents.

C. 2024 Hawai‘i and Pacific Remote Island Areas Annual SAFE Report

Remington, Council contractor, provided an overview of the 2024 Hawai‘i and PRIA annual SAFE report. In 2024, the deep-seven bottomfish CML catch was the lowest reported catch since 1971. This may be due to the fishery not being dominated by higherliners and fewer people fishing for a living. For uku, there was an observed continued decrease in catch, trips, and CML to an all-time low. In contrast, in 2025, there has been a recent resurgence for uku. This was attributed to fleet and market changes. When this overview was presented to the Hawai‘i AP, it attributed the decrease in catch to shark depredation. Fishing is becoming increasingly difficult and economically unfeasible due to increased shark depredation. The Kona crab catch was consistent with that of 2023, and the deepwater shrimp catch was not disclosed, as there were fewer than three reporting licenses due to the pulse nature of the fishery. The top ECS caught in 2024 were *akule* (bigeye scad) and *‘opelu* (mackerel scad) at 202,000 pounds and 90,000 pounds, respectively. In addition, the annual SAFE report tracks about a dozen ECS where all catch decreased in 2024, with the exception of *kala* (unicornfish). Regarding noncommercial catch, due to the high percent standard errors, the Plan Team elected to defer including this information in the SAFE reports and continue improving the data stream. For example, a focused mail survey on effort for uku is being conducted using the vessel registry from the CML database to gather more targeted information.

Regarding the fisher observation section, fishers reported fewer nice weather days, higher water temperatures, and variable currents, which potentially reduce productivity for larger pelagic species. There was an increase in bottomfish during the holidays, accompanied by good prices, although fishers were concerned that social media sales were not being captured. There was an observed change in taste for *ta‘ape* (bluestripe snapper) that could be correlated with increased prices of bottomfish. Shark depredation has caused fishers to change their fishing strategies, and fishers on Kaua‘i have been competing for space at boat harbors with tour boats. In 2024, fishers observed a strong recruitment of baitfish.

The National Coral Reef Monitoring Program conducted surveys in both the MHI and Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). Based on the results, trends in fish biomass are relatively mixed, with Moloka‘i showing an increase in fish biomass compared to O‘ahu.

Regarding the PIFSC Life History Program, a reproduction study was completed for *onaga*, and ongoing work is being conducted on age, growth and reproduction for *lehi* (silverjaw snapper), *‘ōpaka* (pink snapper) and *onaga*.

Socioeconomic data indicated that fuel prices were consistent with those of 2023 but higher than those of the previous decade. For the bottomfish fishery, there were decreased landings and revenue driven by the price for deep seven bottomfish species. There was an increase for uku to about \$7.50 per pound. Protected species interactions showed no notable increase in interactions. Oceanic and climate indicators showed slight changes, with a shift from El Niño to neutral conditions and an increase in sea surface temperatures. However, these increased temperatures are not likely to be associated with coral bleaching or mortality.

D. Annual Catch Limit Specifications for Main Hawaiian Islands Uku for 2026 to 2029 (Final Action)

Zach Yamada, Council staff, presented the alternatives for the ACL specifications of MHI uku for fishing years 2026 to 2029. He 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 acceptable biological catches (ABCs) and ACLs. NMFS 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 Alternative 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 alternative 2, the status quo, the Council may specify an ACL based on the previous stock assessment at 295,419 pounds, which corresponds to a 41% risk of overfishing, and set an annual catch target (ACT) at 291,010 pounds, corresponding to 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 data, and close federal waters if the ACT is reached to prevent the ACL from being exceeded. As a post-season accountability measure (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 alternative 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 comply 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 alternative 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 corresponds to 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 Hawai'i Marine Recreational Fishing Survey 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. Alternatives five and six correlate with options three and four, respectively. If the Council specified ACLs lower than the P* and SEEM analysis, it would comply 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 impact on protected species, biodiversity, ecosystems, or habitats.

E. Fishing Regulations for the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary Final Rule Update

Makaiau, NMFS PIRO, provided an overview of the fishing regulations for the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary. In early January, the NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program published a final rule to designate the sanctuary. In March, NOAA published a notice stating that the sanctuary designation became final and effective as of March 3, 2025. Fishing in the sanctuary is prohibited unless it is permitted under one of the sanctuary's permitted activities. Commercial fishing, removing, harvesting, or possessing any living or non-living resources is also prohibited. There is a provision in the regulations that authorizes noncommercial fishing under the MSA from 50 to 200 nm, provided that no fish is sold. Under the previous Council recommendation, consideration was given to allow applicants to request, during the application process, to sell a portion of their catch to recover costs under a Native Hawaiian fishing practice trip in the NWHI. In a March 24, 2025, notice, NOAA announced that NMFS is reviewing the final rule for consistency with the administration policies and EOs. There were no further updates on the status of the review. EO 14276, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," includes a provision that directs the secretary of commerce to review all existing Marine National monuments and provide records to the president on whether any of these areas should be open to commercial fishing. The review is being coordinated through the policy offices of NMFS and NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS). Factors to be considered include the importance of commercial fishing that were impacted when the monuments were established, ecological impacts to the area if fishing were to be resumed, and the extent to which existing management authorities can protect those monument resources that were identified when the monuments were established. The Council has been tasked with reviewing the monuments and providing recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing to increase production.

Ramsey asked if there is a specific timeline for the different reviews.

Makaiau said the EO on monument review specifies a deadline of Sept. 1, 2025, for the Council to provide its recommendation and a deadline of early October for NOAA. PIRO is coordinating amongst the divisions and regions in coordination with the USFWS and other partners.

Simonds said the Council sent a letter following the March meeting seeking clarification on the fishing regulations in the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary and reaffirmed its position to oppose fishing prohibitions in the NWHI. She asked the Council if they would like to make a statement or wait until NOAA has finished its review of the monuments and sanctuaries.

Guthertz said the Council should reaffirm the original position to allow fishing in the NWHI.

Sword said when he previously served on the Council, the Council discussed allowing Native Hawaiians the opportunity to fish in the area, as the fish were dying of old age. He had asked what the purpose of the monument was, and it was said it was for the people; however, only the rich and famous can afford to go into the monuments. These areas should be accessible

to everyone for the benefit of the people and the country. It has always been the Council and Pacific Islanders' philosophy to have access to feed their people.

Guthertz said she was impressed with the American Samoa representatives' interactions with the president, who recognized the territories and their indigenous people. People should feel comfortable discussing indigenous and cultural fishing traditions. Everyone on the Council grew up with that and continues to honor that. President Trump listened to the American Samoa representatives and even had some knowledge of the traditional fishing practices in the territories. The Council should build on the interaction with the president and continue to discuss the territories and the importance of fisheries to the communities.

Raynal said it would be of interest to hear from Native Hawaiian groups. In the past, the USFWS supported Native Hawaiian groups that opposed commercial fishing within the marine national monument and would like to hear from other Native Hawaiian groups.

Sword said the Council heard from Native Hawaiian representatives who requested the opportunity to fish in the monument, but they were denied. Some groups formed NGOs that say they speak for Native Hawaiians; however, they only represent their own group. Native Hawaiians have made the request and have been denied. If you ask again, then they will give an answer.

Weaver said during the Fishers Forum the previous night that the Hawaiian fishers asked for the opportunity to fish in the monument, and he stands behind their request.

Muña asked if Kamaka'ala was a Native Hawaiian.

Ramsey said she is Hawaiian but was not present at the Council meeting.

Sword said there were a lot of people who showed up to the Fishers Forum, and Hawaiians said they want to fish in the NWHI.

Ramsey said it is difficult to say that Native Hawaiians want something because there is a diversity of views and perspectives when it comes to Hawaiians, as everyone views the NWHI as a special place. He asked if it is deemed that the monument is open to commercial fishing, what would that look like.

Makaiau said the sanctuary regulations, as they are promulgated, would allow fishing under an MSA permit provided that no fish is sold. The Council's standing recommendation that would allow a Native Hawaiian subsistence fishing permit applicant to request a portion of its catch to be sold would be inconsistent with applicable laws. However, if the administration finds that the sanctuary regulations are not consistent with its priorities and the EOs, several scenarios could occur, including revising sanctuary regulations to allow commercial fishing in certain areas of the sanctuary potentially. He did not want to speculate, but there could potentially be changes to the sanctuary regulations.

F. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations

1. Advisory Panel

Kuali'i presented the Hawai'i AP meeting report and recommendations.

He said he is Native Hawaiian, and he supports any fishing in the NWHI. The Hawaiian community has become fractured due to the influence of Western beliefs. People do not take care of each other, and now there are various traditions and cultural rights that claim to be more important than others.

Regarding Hawai‘i fishery issues, the Hawai‘i AP requests the Council assist the Hawai‘i small-boat fishery to quantify and address shark depredation issues in order to provide greater context to the declines in fishing in the Hawai‘i module of the annual SAFE report.

Kuali‘i said shark depredation is a significant issue and requires addressing through collaboration with the State and other organizations.

Regarding MHI uku ACL specifications, the Hawai‘i AP recommends the Council select alternative 4, setting an ACL of 401,020 pounds with a post-season AM. The AP notes that they are not comfortable with the ACL being set utilizing existing noncommercial data and hopes potential refinements of the data and stock assessments can be done with the results of current and future data collection efforts.

Regarding EO 14276, the Hawai‘i AP recommends the Council consider allowing all fishing in the NWHI monument/sanctuary.

2. Plan Team

Marlowe Sabater, APT chair, presented the recommendations.

Regarding the MHI uku ACLs, the APT reiterates its previous recommendation to choose alternative 4 that specifies ACL at 401,020 pounds (36%) with post-season AM only.

3. Social Science Planning Committee

Severance reported on the SSPC meeting report and recommendations.

Regarding the uku ACL action item, the SSPC recommends the Council consider the multi-sector and multi-cultural nature of the fishery, as well as social and cultural importance of the uku fishery.

4. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee

There were no FIAC recommendations for Hawai‘i.

5. Scientific and Statistical Committee

There were no SSC recommendations for Hawai‘i.

G. Public Comment

Abraham Apilado, Kaua‘i commercial fisherman, said in 2015 that he became involved in the establishment of the monument when a proposal was made to expand the NWHI monument to 200 nm. In 2015, he along with other fishers, went to the State Capitol to visit Senator Ron Kouchi and William Aila to present their thoughts on the expansion of the NWHI. There was an uncle who was pushing for the expansion, and he told him, “Uncle, I respect you, I love what you are doing, but the government does not care about us.” That uncle said if it were

not for Nihoa and what they promised him, then he would be in opposition to the expansion of the NWHI. Due to outside interests influencing the expansion, half of the middle bank was included in the expansion, and they wanted that uncle to fight the fishing community to win their battle. In a previous presentation on the annual SAFE report, a survey was conducted to report on the biomass in the NWHI. If the NWHI is doing such a good thing for the fishery, then why is it underperforming compared to the MHI. It was his dream to fish in the NWHI, but it was crushed at age 11 when the first monument was established. Not everyone has the privilege to be a NWHI fisherman. Similar to farming, when you protect the land and sanction a section of it, weeds begin to grow and overtake the area. It takes extra care to ensure your fruits and vegetables have a successful harvest. Without fishermen, that care is not happening in the NWHI. If he were to go now, there would be monk seals and uluas all over the area since they have no predators. People think that fishers think only one way; however, without fishers regulating the fish and taking of their *kuleana* (responsibility), then the weeds will grow. Nobody can go into the area, and even if they say they have a permit, it is hard to acquire the permit. Without representation, they have to trust only what is written on paper. In the Bible, it is a God-given right of man to have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over all the earth. There is no dominion, and it stops where the government says it stops. Fishing is not beautiful, and they are killing, bleeding, and gutting animals. They are also battling with sharks and other sea life. At the Fishers Forum, a Hawaiian fisher said, “Nobody ever told one farmer to farm enough food for him and his family,” so why put the limit on fishers?

Manuel Dueñas, Guam fisherman, said the sanctuary regulations do not belong in the world because there is no cultural value to put regulations on fishing. The opposing side refers to cultural values, but he does not know whose culture they are talking about. Regarding uku, the Pacific Islands Fisheries Group (PIFG) did a study 20 years ago showing that uku migrate from the MHI to the NWHI. It was once professed that the NWHI was feeding the MHI, but in reality it was the opposite, that is why scientists will not spend their time doing tagging studies. He is part of the indignant people who are frustrated with the way they are treated and disrespected. He is happy for American Samoa, as they received a study from PIFSC that explains their culture, but there was no study on the Mariana Islands or Hawai‘i. Native Hawaiians were kicked out of their land because of people who came from the continental US and work for the federal government with higher salaries. At the same time, Hawaiians sit on the hilltops with red dirt between their toes, much like those in Guam. The rich get to travel and catch fish in the NWHI, along with scientists, the military, and everyone on the federal list. He said Hawaiians should be allowed to sell their fish to recover losses and asked where NOAA finds the money to study rocks when they incur losses. The councils should have their own attorney because they are at odds with the NMFS attorneys. Regarding compensation, where do Hawaiians get their money to go into the NWHI and catch fish. They have to buy their gas, whereas others have billions of dollars to support various trips to enter the NWHI.

Ilaoa, American Samoa AP member, said he supports the recommendation that was provided by the Hawai‘i AP to allow fishing in the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary. This recommendation echoes the requests from American Samoa and Mariana Islands as well. Fishing is not just an economic activity in the Pacific; it is ingrained in their way of life and essential to the cultural heritage of their livelihoods.

Leina‘ala Ley, Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA), said OHA depends on Native Hawaiian beneficiaries and has been involved in the monument and sanctuary designation process. OHA did support the monument expansion, and the irregular shape of the monument was a compromise that was supported to ensure the expansion of the monument did not interfere with *lawai‘a* (fishers) from Kaua‘i who fish in that area. Their office is a co-trustee of the

monument and supports the sanctuary regulations implemented by ONMS. They supported them to the extent that they mirrored existing protections that a broad base of the Native Hawaiian community has endorsed. There was no consensus of opinion, but many cultural practitioners advocated for the establishment of the original monument and the expansion of the area to protect and revitalize cultural resources. The NWHI serves as a *pu 'uhonua* (sanctuary) for endangered species (i.e., *manu* [birds], monk seals, *honu* [green sea turtle], and *mano* [sharks]) who rely on the area to breed. There is a variety of *kanaloa* (Hawaiian god of the sea) that live in the ocean and on the land within the monument, which benefits from protection from fishing and other extractive uses. Hopefully again, as a *pu 'uhonua* that also benefits *lawai 'a*. People who fish in the NWHI have seen 'ahi and other kinds of fish they have never seen before. There is a large swath of the community that supports the existing restrictions, and with due respect to other perspectives, there are other resources to refer to.

Sword asked Ley if she was a fisher and what OHA is protecting the monument expansion area from.

Ley said she was not a fisher, *kanaloa*, which includes the monument expansion area. This area protects other forms of *kanaloa*, including fish, marine mammals and whales that traverse through the area.

Sword said the Council has rules that protect marine mammals and wanted to know from the Hawaiian perspective.

H. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding MHI uku ACLs, the Council:

- 1. Recommended, as final action, alternative 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. As AMs, the Council recommends discontinuing the in-season closure AM. Therefore, the Council recommends a post-season AM where if the average catch of the three most recent years exceeds the specified ACL in a fishing year, the ACL for the subsequent fishing year will be reduced by the amount of the overage.**

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 Itibus; seconded by Guthertz.
Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

Regarding fishing regulations in Papahānaumokuākea, the Council:

2. **Reaffirmed its original position that fisheries in the NWHI were managed sustainably prior to the monument and sanctuary designations and despite more than 60 years of commercial fisheries operating, the area was recognized as one of the healthiest, intact marine ecosystems in the world demonstrating that the NWHI commercial fisheries did not negatively impact resources of historic or scientific interest. Therefore, the Council requests the president remove the burden on U.S. fisheries caused by the prohibition on fishing to increase production that is sustainable and consistent with the recent EOs. Further, the Council directs staff to communicate these concerns to the Administration prior to the end of the anticipated public comment period.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

Regarding the Hawai‘i Annual SAFE Report, the Council:

3. **Directed staff to work with the APT and Hawai‘i AP to assist the Hawai‘i small-boat fishery in quantifying and addressing shark depredation issues in order to provide greater context to the declines in fishing in the Hawai‘i module of the annual SAFE report.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

IX. Program Planning and Research

A. Legislative Report

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, reported since the last Council meeting, there was a shark bill that passed the House of Representatives that includes the councils on a task force to reduce shark depredation. There are also other bills that would amend the ESA, another that would reauthorize the MSA called Sustaining America’s Fisheries for the Future Act, a bill to prohibit shark feeding in Florida, the Forage Fish Conservation Act, and a bill to reauthorize the Young Fishermen’s Development Act. The House also held an oversight hearing titled “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.” He said there is likely to be more new bills to come given that Capitol Hill Ocean Week was held last week.

B. Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations

1. Proclamation 10918 Unleashing American Commercial Fishing in the Pacific

This agenda item was taken up under the presentation given by Rauch under agenda item V.A.

2. Executive Order 14276 Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness, including Review of Marine National Monuments (Marianas Trench, Rose Atoll and Papahānaumokuākea)

DeMello presented that under Section 4(h) of EO 14276, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness,” the secretary of commerce is required to review the existing marine national monuments and provide recommendations to the president of any that should be open to

commercial fishing within 180 days. Simultaneously, the Council received a letter from the NMFS Assistant Administrator requesting the Council look at reducing burdens on domestic fishing and increasing production. This provided the impetus for the Council to re-examine regulations for the marine national monuments in the Pacific.

The monument designations started in 2006 and were expanded in subsequent presidential proclamations. The size of the monuments were compared to the different states and areas to provide scale with the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument area compared to the size of the Gulf of America; the PIHMNM compared to the size of Texas; the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument to the size of the State of Maryland; and the MTMNM compared to the size of the United Kingdom. Current fishing regulations in the monuments prohibit commercial fishing but allow noncommercial and/or customary exchange fishing by federal permit. Council staff is looking at the fishing regulations as well as the designation for justification in order to provide information to the secretary of commerce. The Council has existing fishing regulations in these areas that could continue to provide protection while allowing fishing. The current EO provides another chance to address fishing in the monuments and that the Council is on record requesting sustainable fishing be allowed in the monuments.

Asuka Ishizaki, Council staff, reported on the development of the Council's recommendations under Section 4(a)(i) of EO 14276, which is the provision that directs the councils to provide recommendations to the secretary of commerce. The Council received a request to update and build on its recommendations submitted in 2020 pursuant to EO 13921, the Seafood EO from the first Trump Administration. The Council previously had various recommendations related to the MSA, ESA, MMPA and other applicable law in a prioritized list of recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and increase production within sustainable fishing. The highest priorities included removing monument fishing prohibitions, providing flexibility for ACL specifications, exemptions to essential fish habitat, and recommendations on recusal policies. There were also several recommendations related to protected species that included streamlining ESA consultation procedures, exemptions to critical habitat, and the removal of MMPA Take Reduction Plan regulations and guidelines. There were also recommendations related to the Billfish Conservation Act, COFA renegotiations and the Lacey Act utilization. She said there were also a set of seafood trade recommendations that related to improving access to foreign markets, resolving technical barriers to U.S. seafood exports and supporting fair market access for U.S. seafood products.

EO 14276 requires the Council to take those previous recommendations and update them to identify actions that will help stabilize markets, improve access, enhance economic profitability, and prevent closures. Council staff is also looking at existing regulations that may have the most burden for the region's fisheries to provide recommendations that may satisfy the Administration's deregulatory actions. Council staff is working on pulling all these pieces together to update the seafood EO recommendations and provide them to the secretary of commerce by Sept. 30, 2025.

Simonds said the Council will have to respond before the next Council meeting so Council members should provide staff with anything to add to the recommendations. Simonds asked Council members to read the documents in their briefing materials and provide any comments back to Council staff.

C. Aligning Science and Management Priorities

Mark Mitsuyasu, Council staff, provided an update on the process for aligning science and management priorities between the Council and NMFS. Council staff developed a matrix that cross-referenced all the management species against the MSA requirements as a starting point for discussions with PIRO and PIFSC staff on where the gaps are with regards to management and research priorities.

Makaiau, PIRO, reported NMFS expects less resources over the next several years. The idea behind this alignment exercise was to have the councils focus and reprioritize which fisheries are truly in need of conservation and management, and which species are highly valuable or critical with respect to risks and threats to the fisheries. He said NMFS headquarters will provide additional guidance on how to look at the importance and risks of fisheries so that the Council can identify those fisheries and prioritize how to deal with them.

Soliai said across the board, NMFS needs to look at everything that threatens the fisheries, whether it be internal or other laws or acts that may overlap.

Simonds said pelagic and bottomfish fisheries are prioritized because the other species like coral reef fish have been included as ECS. This is a very difficult task because this region already has less than all of the other regions in the United States and the Council is being asked to do this but there is not much to reduce.

D. Report on Inflation Reduction Act Program Projects

Mitsuyasu reported contractors for the different IRA project priorities are now in place including scenario planning and the continued work with communities.

1. Scenario Planning

Fitchett reported the IRA projects include two scenario planning initiatives, one for the American Samoa and Hawai'i longline fishery, and the other for the small-boat archipelagic fisheries. Contractors have been identified and are working to put together a steering committee to plan a series of workshops for the project with the goal of preparing longline fisheries for changing environmental conditions in the future. The SSC is also preparing background information on climate change and how potential environmental shifts would affect the pelagic fishery resources.

2. Community Engagement/Capacity Building

Mitsuyasu reported the second project involves community consultation and capacity building. The contractor has been on board since early March and has been conducting public meetings throughout the region.

Alex Min, PIFG, provided an update on the IRA community consultation and capacity building projects. The project has two priority areas: listening to the community and understanding their concerns and impacts from ecosystem change; and engaging with Pacific Island communities to build capacity in U.S. Pacific Island fisheries. The project has completed 13 meetings throughout the CNMI, Guam and the MHI and will be traveling to American Samoa in the coming weeks. A young fishers vocational training session is planned for September 2025 to meet the second priority area.

Eight meetings were held between March and April across the MHI where communities noted environmental changes from nearshore to offshore and the impacts to the offshore species.

‘Ahi are getting smaller, currents are shifting, and there is an increase in shark depredation and abundance. Communities also explained that every harbor is overused, underfunded, or unsafe, which impacts access and creates safety concerns. There were also comments that FADs are not holding fish the same way they used to and that notices from the military regarding bombing at Kaula Rock are not getting to the fishermen. The project team will be heading to American Samoa to conduct more meetings which will conclude the first round of meetings. A report will be completed and provided to the Council prior to a second round of meetings throughout the islands.

The project team is currently in the planning process for the vocational fisher training pilot program and are seeking passionate young fishers for the next generation that want to increase the commercial landings and their commercial fishing effort and stimulate their opportunity for the coming years. The benefits of the program will include eight days of training on different fishing methods within the region with trips and lodging covered as well as a stipend provided upon completion. The application period is open with 16 respondents to date. The next steps will be inviting industry experts to serve on the steering committee.

Soliai said the work being conducted fulfills the obligations of the Council under the MSA and National Standard 8. He said robust stakeholder engagement is part of that process of considering fisheries important to the community.

Muña asked if Guam fishers applied for the vocational training program.

Min said most of the applicants have come from Guam and the CNMI and expects the steering committee to review and select the attendees from throughout the region.

E. Council Education and Outreach Report

Amy Vandehey, Council staff, presented the Education and Outreach Report highlighting activities from March through May. Activities included the quarterly newsletter with the main story being the presidential proclamation, outcomes from the fisher community meetings, changes happening in the Guam fishing scene, and some new fisheries training for educators’ initiative in American Samoa. Media coverage has also been a major activity with a lot of national and local attention on the proclamation and EOs. The Council put out a press release that provided the Council’s perspective that received a lot of media attention and misunderstandings, so a second clarification press release was put out with an updated map of the areas involved. There were also media requests where the executive director was on Hawai‘i Public Radio and Council members from American Samoa were interviewed on a local radio station.

The Council Member Ongoing Development (CMOD) training, organized by the CCC, was held from April 30 through May 1, 2025, in Vancouver, Washington. The Council sent several representatives to represent the different island areas. The training was focused on climate-related vulnerabilities, risk and communication strategies. The Council also supported MREP which held a session in the beginning of April. Council staff, advisors and affiliates gave presentations, led activities and were members of the Exploratory Committee. There were interactive sessions on fishery science and Council management process in hopes of empowering people that were attending with the knowledge and tools that they would need to be able to engage in the future. Feedback from the participants included appreciation for having the ability to network across the different regions and providing the support for being able to engage in the

process. The next workshop is planned for April 10-16, 2026, in Honolulu and applications are currently open.

F. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations

1. Advisory Panel

Clay Tam, AP chair, presented the AP recommendations.

Regarding MREP, the CNMI AP recommends the Council continue to support the continuation of the program in the Western Pacific Region.

2. Plan Teams

Sabater, APT chair, reported on the APT held May 5-6, 2025, and the joint Archipelagic and PPT meeting May 7, 2025. The PPT continued its meeting May 8-9, 2025. The meetings covered the fisheries performance and ecosystem modules of the annual SAFE report and several potential management issues including ECS and the Marine Recreational Information Program. Sabater provided an overview of the discussion items from the meetings and provided the recommendations from each meeting.

Regarding data collection for the fishery modules of the territorial annual SAFE reports and the next territorial benchmark assessments, the APT recommends the Council:

- In coordination with PIFSC through the Fisheries Data Collection and Research Committee, work with the jurisdictional fisheries management agencies in identifying and removing the barriers that prevents efficient and effective collection of fisheries data resulting in a decline in survey interviews and reporting of the fishery constituents affecting representativeness of data reported in the Annual SAFE Reports and future benchmark assessments;
- Work with the CNMI DLNR, in collaboration with PIFSC, to implement the Mandatory License and Reporting Regulation. Further the APT recommends the Council encourage Guam Department of Agriculture to develop their mandatory license and reporting regulation;
- Work with PIFSC and jurisdictional fisheries management agencies in exploring the feasibility of collecting more length information to develop a rate-based monitoring in support of the Tier-6 ABC Control Rule amendment that the Council took final action on at its 202nd meeting.

Regarding Marine Recreational Information Program, the APT recommends the Council, in coordination with PIFSC and PIRO, convene the MRIP Pacific Island Regional Implementation Team with participation from the following APT members Marc Nadon, Rob Ahrens, Minling Pan, Jason Helyer, Bryan Ishida, Danika Kleiber and Jenny Suter to develop regional priorities to augment the priorities identified in the MRIP Reenvisioning and the updated Pacific Islands Regional Implementation Plan.

Regarding the 2024 evaluation of catches relative to their respective ACLs, the APT verified the catches were below their respective ACLs except for the Guam BMUS where the three-year average catch is 31,426 pounds. The APT notes that the Council and PIRO are working on the new ACL specification rulemaking package with the Council taking final

action in December 2024 at its 201st meeting with a new ACL at 34,500 pounds. The APT recommends the Council apply the new ACL as the basis for the catch evaluation.

The PPT recommends Plan Team members, Hawai‘i DAR and Council staff present Hawai‘i pelagic small-boat fishery catch and effort data at Council IRA project and Council advisory group meetings. These include, but are not limited to, the Hawai‘i AP, FIAC, and Non-commercial Fisheries Advisory Committee. This is for the purpose of documenting characteristics of Hawai‘i pelagic small-boat fisheries and gleaning fishery performance by Hawaiian island and gear type reported.

The PPT recommends the Council, in coordination with PIFSC through the Fisheries Data Collection and Research Committee, work with the jurisdictional fisheries management agencies in identifying and removing the barriers that prevents efficient and effective collection of fisheries data resulting in a decline in survey interviews and reporting of the fishery constituents affecting representativeness of data reported in the Annual SAFE Reports and future benchmark assessments

3. Social Science Planning Committee

Severance, SSPC chair, reported on the SSPC meeting report and recommendations.

Regarding the SEEM process review, the SSPC endorses the SEEM Process Review Working Group report (included in the SSPC report as Appendix A) and recommends the Council vet the working group report through the advisory groups for further input in advance of the September Council meeting. The SSPC notes the potential synergy with the fishers observation reports and the potential benefits of more effective community engagement.

Severance noted that two members of the SSPC were also on the SSC at the time that the SEEM process was presented at the National SSC Meeting in Boston in 2024. There was considerable interest from the other participants but it was also apparent that no other Council or SSC goes through an effort like this, which is interesting given that the SEEM process derives directly from National Standard 1.

Regarding the role of SSPC in the Council process, the SSPC forms a working group (Hospital, Severance, Cabrera, Ayers) to further consider the role of the SSPC in the Council process (including review of other Council’s social science plans and considering revitalization of membership), in preparation for a strategic plan review at an intersessional SSPC meeting.

Severance reported this recommendation comes from the fact that previously three of the SSPC members also served on the SSC, but only one member is currently serving on both committees.

4. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee

Goto presented the FIAC recommendations.

Regarding the EOs and marine national monuments, the FIAC recommends that the Council direct staff to work with the FIAC to collect feedback on recent EOs, including review of marine national monuments, regulatory constraints, trade issues, and other issues to incorporate in the Council’s letter that it will transmit to the DOC in response to EO 14276, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.

5. Fishery Data Collection and Research Committee

Jones, PIFSC, presented the Fishery Data Collection and Research Committee (FDCRC) meeting report and recommendations.

Regarding the fishery data collection in the Pacific Islands jurisdictions, the FDCRC recommends the Council:

- Request PIFSC to work with the jurisdictional fisheries management agencies in American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI, to explore alternative methods to collect fisheries data from the bottomfish fisheries;
- In partnership with PIFSC, support CNMI DLNR in expediting the implementation of Title 85 Chapter 85-30 Division of Fish and Wildlife, Subchapter 85-30.5 (Commercial Fishing Recording and Reporting Regulations);
- Encourage the American Samoa DMWR, Guam DAWR, CNMI DFW, and Hawai'i DAR to finalize the Fisheries Management Plan that would include plans for monitoring the fisheries included in the plan for implementation in January 2026;
- Hold meetings of the FDCRC and its Technical Committee in August to review the Strategic Plan and alternative data collection methods.

6. Scientific and Statistical Committee

Lynch presented the SSC recommendations.

Regarding the 2024 Annual SAFE Report and recommendations, the SSC:

- Requests that future Annual SAFE reports include a digital dashboard of fishery indicators relative to thresholds that allow the rapid identification of anomalous or negative conditions or trends;
- Recommends future reports include notations when data are missing from figures or tables to indicate if there is no datum or a zero value;
- Requests that logbook presentations focus on highlights and anomalies relative to thresholds and trends rather than a comprehensive review of all data.

Lynch reported the annual SAFE report contains a lot of very useful information and the SSC has requested that PIFSC and others that work on this report to create a dashboard to allow a more rapid identification of trends based on data generated through this process. The SSC also noted that trends sometimes are just connected dots without notations about missing data, which is also a very important consideration.

7. Military Expansion Standing Committee

Muña presented the Military Expansion Standing Committee meeting report and recommendations.

Regarding military expansion efforts, the Military Expansion Standing Committee:

- Requests the Council recommend that Council staff review the CNMI Joint Military Training EIS for the Marianas to brief Council family and fishers for the upcoming site visits by the Military Transition Team for the public comment period.

G. Public Comment

Tam, PIFG, commented that while the agency can be applauded for holding the region's fisheries to a higher standard in terms of stewardship and conservation, it comes at a cost. After listening to the reports of what is happening to the American Samoa longline fishery and Hawai'i's fisheries being marginalized, it is hard to fathom that kind of impact on the fisheries. If these fisheries or fishermen were a marine mammal or endangered species that was in a continuous decline, the federal government would immediately put them on a list and protect them. He expressed concern that fishers continue to be marginalized through this process. He asked when the agencies are going to come together and work to support the fishing community. As an observer to WCPFC and IATTC, he said there is not one country in those organizations that would put their fisheries in this kind of jeopardy. The effects on the big fisheries can trickle down and affect the small-boat fishery and those that survive off the fisheries. Empirical knowledge is important and the fishers' observations included in the annual report show how the fisheries were run for centuries in the Western Pacific. He recalled that a navigator in the CNMI talking about climate change said the sun is an hour and a half off its axis. There is a shift going on that is driving a lot of these changes in the fishery. The observational people who are the fishermen looking at the fisheries have great success and an understanding of true ecosystem-based management. He said he hopes that there is going to be some synergy and connection to better understand the fisheries in the Western Pacific Region.

Manny Dueñas, Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association, commented that he supported the SSPC's efforts and that every Council action should include social science. Social science has always been dismissed but it is all about the people. He said he was concerned about the territories developing FMPs because environmental organizations are invited to assist when it should be a collaboration between fishermen and scientists. People outside the issue should be the cheerleaders of the effort. He said the military intrusion on coastal fisheries has always been neglected and the Mariana Islands is a testing and training ground with lots of military activity that is impacting the coastal fisheries. All the populated areas of the Mariana Islands are used by the military and the coastal areas are being blocked off, prohibiting them from fishing in those areas. He questioned why Guam species are treated as a separate stock from the CNMI, as it is one Mariana Archipelago almost 1,500 miles long with 3,000 miles of offshore area and the ACL should be treated as such.

H. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding the status of EOs, the Council:

- 1. Endorsed the preliminary list of recommendations for reducing burdens on domestic fishing and to increase production in response to Section 4(a)(i) of EO 14276, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," and directs staff to work with the Executive Committee to finalize the recommendations with the justification document, incorporating any further feedback as appropriate.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

- 2. Directed staff to review existing marine national monuments in the Pacific, regarding fishery prohibitions, and provide a report to the Executive Committee in advance of providing the secretary of commerce with additional information on the fishing regulations in the marine national monuments in response to Section 4(h) of EO 14276.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

3. **Directed staff to compile prior correspondence and recommendations on trade issues and develop a letter to the secretary of commerce and the U.S. trade representative to convey all issues related to trade that create disadvantages to Western Pacific fisheries. Measures needed to mitigate these issues should be included in the America First Seafood Strategy, described in EO 14276.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

Regarding the CCC effort to identify and align national and regional management and science priorities, the Council:

4. **Directed staff to continue to work with NMFS PIRO and PIFSC on regional alignment and prioritization of management and science needs as NMFS leadership develops national evaluation criteria that takes into consideration value and risk of managed fisheries.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

Regarding monitoring of noncommercial fisheries, the Council:

5. **Directed staff to coordinate with NMFS PIFSC and PIRO to convene the MRIP Pacific Island Regional Implementation Team with participation to develop regional priorities to augment the priorities identified in the MRIP reenvisioning and the updated Pacific Islands Regional Implementation Plan.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

Regarding the annual SAFE reports, fishery monitoring, and stock assessments, the Council:

6. **Directed staff to work with NMFS PIFSC and the territories in identifying, and removing, the barriers that prevent efficient and effective collection of fisheries data. This should include those that result in a decline in survey interviews and including reporting of the fishery constituents affecting representativeness of data reported.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

7. **Directed staff to work with the CNMI DLNR and NMFS PIFSC to implement the Mandatory License and Reporting Regulation. Further the Council encourages Guam and American Samoa to consider developing their own mandatory license and reporting regulation.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

- 8. Directed staff to work with NMFS PIFSC and the territories to explore the feasibility of collecting additional length information to develop rate-based monitoring in support of the Tier-6 ABC Control Rule amendment.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

- 9. Directed staff to work with PPT members and Hawai'i DAR to present Hawai'i pelagic small-boat fishery catch and effort data at Council IRA project and Council advisory group meetings for the purpose of documenting characteristics and gleaning fishery performance by Hawaiian island and gear type.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

- 10. Directed staff to work with the Plan Team to address the SSC's recommendations on the annual SAFE report to:**
 - **Include a digital dashboard of fishery indicators relative to thresholds that allow the rapid identification of anomalous or negative conditions or trends;**
 - **Include notations when data are missing from figures or tables to indicate if there is no datum or a zero value;**
 - **Focus presentations on highlights and anomalies relative to thresholds and trends rather than a comprehensive review of all data.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

Regarding Education and Outreach, the Council:

- 11. Directed staff to continue supporting the efforts of MREP for the region.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Weaver.

Motion passed.

Regarding the SSPC Report, the Council:

- 12. Directed the SSPC to solicit feedback from the advisory groups on the SEEM Process Review Working Group Report and provide a final report to the September or December 2025 Council meeting.**

Moved by Soliai; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

Regarding the fishery data collection in the Pacific Islands jurisdictions, the Council:

- 13. Requested NMFS PIFSC work with the territorial fisheries management agencies to explore alternative methods to collect fisheries data.**
- 14. Directed staff to work with NMFS PIFSC to support CNMI DLNR in expediting the implementation of its Commercial Fishing Recording and Reporting Regulations.**
- 15. Encouraged American Samoa DMWR, Guam DAWR, CNMI DFW, and Hawai'i DAR to finalize the Fisheries Management Plan that would include plans for**

monitoring the fisheries for implementation by January 2026.

16. Directed staff to work with NMFS PIFSC to hold meetings of the FDCRC and its Technical Committee in August to review the Strategic Plan and alternative data collection methods.

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Guthertz.

Motion passed.

X. Mariana Archipelago

A. Guam

1. Isla Informe

Guthertz reported the Council's Military Working Group has been actively working to ensure fishermen in Guam and the CNMI are not left out or unfairly impacted. The group met numerous times since May 2025 to discuss the military expansion and corresponding increase in personnel impacts to the community, especially the fishing community, with off-base mitigation matters to these increases. The Port Authority of Guam has been responsive to fisher concerns by hosting a tour of Guam's marinas, Harbor of Refuge and Atlantis Marina, to view firsthand what is needed to accommodate the expansion.

She said regional developments involving China will have significant implications for Guam and the CNMI, particularly concerning access to critical marine resources and regional security. On May 26, China launched a project to revive a World War II-era airfield on Woleai Atoll, located in Yap State of the FSM, just 420 miles southeast of Guam. FSM President Wesley Simina was present at the inauguration ceremony. China is steadily expanding its influence in the Pacific through infrastructure investments that often carry dual-use potential. Given Woleai's proximity to Guam, any Chinese-controlled facility in the area could pose strategic challenges.

China's policy of military-civil fusion allows civilian infrastructure to serve military purposes, potentially eroding U.S. military reach and readiness in the region. As these developments unfold, they underscore the critical importance of sustained U.S. engagement and investment in the Freely Associated States to ensure regional stability and protect access to vital marine and strategic assets. China is also positioning itself as a partner in health care, education, and business development across the region. Yap Gov. Charles Chieng emphasized that the redevelopment of the Woleai airfield is essential to the long-term growth and connectivity of Yap and its people. Meanwhile, despite the Pentagon's recent announcement of a \$2 billion infrastructure investment for U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific, many of the region's outer islands remain overlooked. Travel to Woleai for the airfield's groundbreaking requires a four-day sea journey from Yap—aboard a vessel provided by China. FSM's President made the trip on an Australian-donated patrol boat. The absence of a U.S. presence was noticeable.

At the Woleai high school graduation, Chinese representatives are expected to attend, while U.S. officials are not. These symbolic moments reflect a deeper reality: China is filling voids in presence and partnership that the United States has left open. This matters to the Council because China's growing presence in the region is not just about airfields and runways — it's about long-term access to the ocean, fish, and natural resources. As they deepen their footprint

on nearby islands, they will undoubtedly seek to exploit the surrounding waters, impacting the ecosystems and economies the communities rely on.

At the same time, in Tinian, the U.S. military is working to reactivate another World War II-era airfield as part of its effort to reinforce Pacific deterrence. Yet as China accelerates its influence through both soft power and strategic infrastructure, the United States must ensure its investments reach beyond military bases — into the communities and islands that form the first line of regional engagement and resilience. Despite the massive military buildup and infrastructure expansion in the region, it was discovered that no funding has been allocated to address the impacts on fisheries infrastructure or marine resources. The focus remains almost exclusively on military readiness, while the needs of coastal communities — who will bear the brunt of increased activity and restricted access — are being overlooked. The Council must ensure that national security does not come at the expense of food security, cultural survival, and local livelihoods.

Perez reported he participated in the CMOD 2025 during late April and early May in Vancouver, Washington. CMOD provided a deeper understanding of how Council members' input can significantly influence management decisions, even in the face of global factors — like those listed below — that are often outside the Council's direct control. Some key insights from CMOD highlight the profound impact of climate change on fish stocks and aquaculture. It's not just about rising ocean temperatures — changes in precipitation patterns and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are also critical factors. These shifts directly influence fish behavior, reproduction, and distribution. As ocean ecosystems are disrupted, vital food sources and habitats are affected, leading to declining wild fish catches and greater challenges in managing aquaculture operations. Adaptive management strategies are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of both fisheries and aquaculture. The traditional “business as usual” approach is no longer sufficient in the face of climate-related challenges. Key adaptation measures include diversifying fishing gear and target species, adopting climate-resilient aquaculture practices, restoring coastal habitats to serve as natural buffers, and implementing strong monitoring and early warning systems. Equally important is engaging local communities in the development and execution of these strategies to ensure they are effective, practical, and enduring.

Perez also said the rise of social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, has significantly transformed how local catch is marketed. The traditional role of the fishery cooperative as a central, dependable outlet for purchasing fish directly from local fishers has diminished. Today, many fishers are opting to sell their catch directly to restaurants and stores, or through more informal channels such as roadside stands, flea markets, and increasingly, online via social media platforms.

He said the First Malesso' Village Boat-Based Mafuti Kid's Fishing Derby will be held Aug. 2, 2025. A partnership between DAWR, the Guam AP, the Mayor of Malesso and the local community, is working together to host the event to be held within the Cocos Island Lagoon. The main goal is to promote awareness of sustainable resource conservation and management by encouraging community participation and stewardship of the lagoon and its surrounding shoreline. This event will be aligned with Malesso's Community-Based Resource Management Plan, supporting the mayor and village residents in fostering a deeper sense of pride and responsibility for their natural resources. It will be a single species target for *mafuti* or emperor fish.

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

Muña reported all six participation and 18 inshore creel surveys were completed while 29 of 30 scheduled boat-based creel surveys scheduled for this reporting period were completed. 181 fishermen and 180 gears were observed with the shore-based creel survey, with hook and line being the top fishing method, followed by *talaya* (cast net), then gill net. The top three species caught were *ti'ao* (juvenile rabbitfish), *atulai* (bigeye scad) and *i'e* (juvenile jack). The most common method was trolling which made up 63% of trips, 54% of fishing hours, and 61% of people fishing or 48% of all boat-based landings. The top three species recorded with boat-based creel surveys were skipjack tuna, onaga, blackfin barracuda, blue marlin, and yellowtail *kalekale* (lavender jobfish), with all catches accounting for approximately 15.6 metric tons of harvest.

She said six of 14 permitted FAD buoys remain on station. A new FAD buoy design came offline after only four months online, while the Umatac buoys, a traditional design, lasted for approximately seven years. The Facpi 2, a new design buoy, was online for four months. Research is ongoing to identify alternate suppliers and a more cost-effective design than the current process. Satellite echosounder buoys were installed on all online FADs with plans to do the same with all future deployments. Fourteen of 34 shallow water mooring buoys were also on station. Fifteen were deployed in 2023 and 15 others were purchased in 2025 and pending vendor selection to deploy.

A pre-construction Memorandum of Understanding has been initiated with the Port Authority of Guam to repair or improve the Harbor of Refuge. It includes Architectural and Engineering Design and permitted requirements for a courtesy dock and gangway for transient vessels. Being semi-autonomous, the Port's procurement process is quicker than line agencies like DOAG. The Merizo Pier and Boat Ramp project Memorandum of Understanding with the Port Authority of Guam has started for an alternative procurement option and partnership to make the project more efficient. The monthly maintenance surveys of public boat ramps surveys were done with trash and algae removal.

The DAWR Biosampling Program's objective is to assess life history and reproductive biology of Guam's marine fauna at a species level to create policy and guidelines aimed at conserving Guam's natural resources. The program intends to use and share the data to support resource managers and management policies. Space at DAWR will be refurbished and equipped into a biosampling lab.

Scheduled surveys and maintenance were done at 10 cultural educational signs along the shoreline around Guam and included grass trimming, litter and debris removal.

The four fishing platforms were surveyed and maintained and included trash, litter and debris removal and caution tapes were placed in areas that were damaged or railings missing. The Paseo de Susana Fishing Platform has been condemned by the Department of Parks and Recreation due to safety concerns with missing railings. Sustainable Fisheries Fund (SFF) monies are planned to be used to replace railings with stainless steel railings and a gate will be installed for access to the water below.

DAWR, in collaboration with the Greg Perez Foundation, hosted a fishing clinic and fishing event for foster children from Harvest House at the Masso Reservoir.

A spearfishing safety course was completed by two DAWR staff and trained 12 conservation officers in critical water safety and freediving protocols developed for public use.

In April, DAWR hosted FMP spatial measures meetings. They revisited current regulations, discussed MPA options, spawning aggregations, and zoning, and refined all measures for community input. A townhall meeting rehearsal was held and included DAWR, University of Guam and fishers, to obtain feedback on the proposed agenda and management measures. The FMP process started in 2020 and was virtual with about 30 fishers and scientists who joined. Hearing their concerns, different subcommittees were created, including enforcement and policy that addressed fish biomass, community outreach, and others. Village meetings and a stakeholder meeting have been held since 2021, including an exploratory meeting in October 2024. A community survey was done from November 2024 through January 2025 using social media, asking what the concerns were that were relevant. A list was created and refined then presented back to the community for input. A spatial and non-spatial meeting were held in April and a semblance of a draft plan will be shared with the community in June with three meetings, north, central and south. To date, more than 10 meetings were held that included the fishing community. Tentatively, it is hoped the FMP will be completed by the end of September 2025.

Muña said she participated in the 50th U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting in Washington, DC where she co-chaired the Communications and Restoration working groups. She also presented on “bright spots” in coral reef management. She said \$2 million was activated by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation National Coastline Resilience Fund to expand coral reef restoration work through 2028 and includes expanding the capacity at Piti Bomb Holes and Apra Harbor nurseries with the installation of new structures; collected new donor wild coral colonies and added 775 new coral fragments; continued maintenance of more than 2,000 coral fragments; and trialed first outplanting of four species at Piti Bomb Holes. This work was supported by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation and the DOI Office of Insular Affairs. Project proposals were submitted to the NOAA Coastal Habitat Restoration and Resilience Grants for Tribes and Underserved Communities. Partnership work was done with Coral Research and Accelerator Platform-funded researchers to test novel methods for analyzing coral heat stress tolerance to identify which nursery-cultivated genotypes are more resistant to heat stress.

She said aquaculture extension efforts included a meeting with Coreseed Aquaculture and Guam Economic Development Authority to discuss programs that the agency has that Coreseed can avail to help improve operations. A tour of the Fadian Hatchery followed. A presentation was done on recirculating aquaculture systems to University of Guam students studying Introduction to Aquaculture. Technical support was provided to program clients building their own aquaponics systems in Dededo Village. The Aquaculture Division also set up a display at DOAG’s May Harvest event to promote the cultivation of *ado* (*Caulerpa lentillefera*), a popular seaweed found around Guam, and vertical mangrove crab farming. The division also had a display at a DOAG “Ag Loves Guam” event held at Ypao Beach, Tumon to promote *ado*, a seaweed species commercially cultivated in Okinawa, Philippines and Vietnam. The division participated in a listening session convened by the DOAG director’s office to hear concerns and recommendations by stakeholders to help improve agency services. Funding Pre and Full Proposals to finance projects such as a hatchery and aquaculture permitting study for Guam was completed. Donations of fiberglass broodstock and live feed tanks were received from the Aquarium of Guam for the hatchery. At the SPC’s 17th Heads of Fisheries Meeting held in Tasmania during April and May, the division shared Guam’s challenges in developing and expanding aquaculture, including seed stock and feed availability, access to capital

environmental permitting and others and hope the SPC may marshal resources within its means to help. The division launched its DOI Office of Insular Affairs funded project on Aquaculture Quarantine and Testing facility. The grant allowed the hiring of an aquaculture technician.

She said four arrests were made by the conservation officers during May for animal cruelty and illegal fishing in the marine preserves. The conservation officers attended Seashore Reserve planning meetings with the Coastal Zone Management Section of the Bureau of Statistics and Plans during April and Spearfishing Safety Course sessions in May led by a DAWR biologist.

Malloy thanked Muña for the work on the FMP and looks forward to hearing how the outreach events that are planned went.

Muña replied she will report the outcome at the next Council meeting.

3. 2024 Guam SAFE Report

Remington provided a presentation on the update to the Mariana Archipelago 2024 Annual SAFE Report. The report aligns with the Mariana Archipelago FEP with some consistencies between Guam and the CNMI presentations. The species of most concern reflected in the Guam fishery performance data are the BMUS. Commercial data remained confidential during 2024. There is a waiver from the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association to view and publish those data but are reviewing data from less than three other sources but the aggregate data are confidential. Total estimated catch from creel surveys saw a catch increase in 2024 from the previous at 36,000 pounds. The bottomfish industry remains under the rebuilding plan following the 2019 assessment and subsequent assessment update. The bottomfish were determined to not be overfished in the assessment update but not yet rebuilt or the biomass MSY threshold had not been met. That is the biomass at the maximum sustainable yield which would signify the fishery has been rebuilt and can get out from underneath the rebuilding plan which has an ACL of 31,000 pounds. While the catch in 2024 did exceed both 31,000 pounds and 34,500-pound threshold. The Council does not measure catch for a single year against the ACL but instead takes a three-year running average, which is about 31,500 pounds, just above the ACL but well below the new ACL. Despite an increase in catch, there was a decrease in CPUE and means catch increased to a lesser extent than effort. More fishing is happening which means catch goes up but did not signify that catch rates were better or fishing was more efficient.

The ECS in the creel survey data saw that assorted reef fish that were most harvested, with *atulai* (bigeye scad) as the most harvested species in the Commercial Receipt Book data. Assorted reef fish tend to make the list because it is a combination of multiple species that were not identified down to the species-specific level. He said as with American Samoa, attempts to capture noncommercial fishery performance for the Guam bottomfish by estimating noncommercial catch using the total catch from the creel surveys less commercial catch. The intent to sell is a part of the creel survey data by asking fishermen if they intend to sell a portion of their catch. Responses were to sell all or nothing. Most bottomfish harvested around Guam were not sold and 75% were kept.

He also said the Annual SAFE Reports implications of fishing access continued to be tracked. There is a lot of military activity around Guam. The DOD does issue Notice to Mariners when they conduct exercises. During 2024, there were 51 of these exercises. There were 55 warning days for Whiskey 517. These can have implications to fishing because exercises in that area can be similar to a closure and if they can fish there or not. Weather impacts on fishing performance

are also being tracked. In 2024, there were 110 high surf warning days and 74 small craft advisories. There were two cyclone warning events in September and November, which may also have implications for bottomfish effort.

Fisher observations made on the water were collected through quarterly informal AP meetings and at the annual summit hosted by PIFG, supported by PIFSC. Typical species runs were slow with shorter windows. There was a strong mahimahi run but it was sporadic for other pelagic species. There was an increase in small marlin and may explain why there was an increase in blue marlin catch across all island areas. Fishers said that indicators suggest strong recruitment for 2025. Fishers noted the loss of the Coop which was acting as their central market. There has been a shift to online sales of fish since then. Fishers were also wary of species they were trying to sell because of fear of flooding the market and have been taking fewer trips. They noted implications to their fishing effort from loss of power on Guam and that shark depredation was a big point of emphasis as well as an increased traffic at harbors, making it harder for fishers to launch their boats.

He said for life history, sampling of bottomfish to better understand their age, growth, and reproduction continued. Information gathered can be used in stock assessments to figure out how fish stocks are doing year to year. In the past two years, there has been significant progress for BMUS sample collection through biosampling programs implemented on Guam. A biosampling summit was held in November that compiled life history for the region and developed shared priorities. This included the biosamplers from both Guam and the CNMI, as well as partners from NOAA and local resource management agencies. A follow-up summit was held for all to participate. He said there was progress for sample collection over the past two years and the growth curves were completed providing a good understanding of the current age, growth and reproduction of bottomfish. However, there are problems getting the small juveniles, which fishers do not target. This resulted in a program to donate juveniles for deep-water snappers to help fill that portion of the growth curve. In 2024, the length-weight parameters for Guam BMUS were updated. Studies for age, growth and reproduction for lehi, onaga, yellowtail kalekale and gindai are now being conducted.

With ocean and climate indicators, sea surface temperature used data from 1985 to 2009. There were anomalies and showed an increase of 0.024 degrees Celsius average in 2024. Coral thermal stress exposure associated with higher sea surface temperatures, measured in degree heating weeks were noted and that mass bleaching will be expected from the high temperatures in 2024. For chlorophyll-a concentration, a measure of ocean productivity, there were weak negative anomalies or lesser concentration of chlorophyll-a in surface waters than usual, although it remains in line with historical averages.

He said looking ahead there is emphasis on the effort to revamp the Annual SAFE Reports and present a dashboard of changes. Investigation continues on the impact of weather, El Niño-Southern Oscillation, military impacts on fishing efforts, the continued implementation of the new rebuilding ACL for Guam BMUS, and to understand how to facilitate commercial reporting better.

Muña asked if it was in 2024 that work first started with BSP or PIFSC on commercial data or commercial vendors to collect commercial receipts data. She also asked if there was a new category where data are teased out of bottomfish with non-motorized fishers, or kayak fishers who were handlining in the SAFE Report.

Remington said information is collected about shore-based versus boat-based fishing regarding non-motorized fishers. He said he talked about trolling from the pelagic sector on Guam and there is an effort to potentially characterize a handline fishery or a pelagic handline fishery for Guam apart from the troll fishery. This was not implemented in the SAFE Report.

Muña said with monchong, there was a comment from a commercial vendor that the commercial receipt book should be expanded to the types of fish available for them to identify, even if they are not specific to the BMUS.

Remington said he heard about this at the FDCRC meeting where BSP talked about how they need to revise the commercial receipt books to add species apart from the BMUS and the pelagic management unit species.

Muña said the Plan Team should stay in contact with the Coral Reef Initiative Team who have been closely monitoring water temperature and coral bleaching. Guam was on alert for bleaching in 2024 but due to heavy rains, squeaked by without any bleaching events.

Remington said the coral thermal stress exposure and sea surface temperature indicators were developed by a partnership with the PIFSC's Ecosystem Science Division.

B. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

1. Arongol Falú

Weaver presented an update on recent fisheries-related events and socioeconomic conditions in the CNMI. The 21st Annual Fishing Derby was successfully held, with all 33 participating boats returning safely. George Moses, a former CNMI AP member, won the event with a 16.5-pound mahimahi. A side competition awarded a prize for a 28-pound wahoo. Tasi to Table, a CNMI-based nonprofit, hosted its second annual Reel Heroes International Fishing Derby, dedicated to U.S. military personnel. A highlight of the event was a 369-pound marlin caught by a Tasi to Table member, James Roberto, who donated the fish to the community, including to the Manamko Center. CK Lures of Hawai'i provided in-kind support by donating fishing lures, though some categories went unawarded due to minimum weight requirements. The Council also contributed in-kind giveaways. On Rota, the Second Annual Shallow Bottom Derby was held concurrently, honoring the Mesgnon and King families. The largest catch was a 16.7-pound emperor fish, with a total winning weight of 114 pounds. All participants received prizes across two categories.

Weaver said that Fisher's Recognition Week began on May 30 with a proclamation signed by Gov. Arnold Palacios and Lt. Gov. David Apatang, in coordination with government agencies, NGOs, non-profits and fishing organizations including Tasi to Table, Talaya Club, and Isla Fishing Association. The Department of Land and Natural Resources' Division of Fish and Wildlife organized the event that was coordinated by Dena Kamano. A Family Fun Day on June 1 included youth-centered raffles of fishing gear and snorkeling equipment. Prizes were awarded to youth attendees. Given economic challenges, fish markets in the CNMI have adapted to expand their business niche by opening convenient stores or selling freshly prepared food like bentos.

Itibus provided an update on the socioeconomic conditions in the CNMI. On May 29, 2025, Gov. Palacios delivered the State of the Commonwealth Address, outlining developments that impact the CNMI's tourism and fisheries-related sectors. Although no fisheries-specific

infrastructure projects were detailed, the governor announced nearly \$1 billion in public infrastructure investments aimed at supporting the broader economy, including roads, housing, and tourism. Gov. Palacios acknowledged the economic challenges leading to the closure of several long-standing businesses. However, he noted a net positive trend in entrepreneurship, citing that for every business that closed, four new businesses opened. Additionally, he approved a Qualifying Certificate (QC) for Micronesian Air Connection Service, granting full tax abatements on business, gross revenue, corporate income, and individual income taxes, allowing the airline to commence operations. The Hotel Association of the Northern Mariana Islands reported a significant decline in hotel occupancy, averaging 23.5% in April 2025, a decrease of 11% from the previous year. In response, the CNMI has adopted tourism revitalization strategies, including partnerships with regional organizations such as the Pacific Asia Travel Association, to develop environmentally sustainable and culturally respectful tourism initiatives. A seminar held in Japan aimed to strengthen historical and cultural ties between Japan and the Mariana Islands, particularly in the tourism sector. The CNMI is also pursuing marketing collaborations in sports tourism and is enhancing cultural sites, such as the Garapan Heritage Trail, to broaden its appeal and support the recovery of the tourism industry and related local businesses, including fish markets.

Soliai asked what the fish prices are in light of the low hotel occupancy rate.

Weaver said that prices vary depending on the vendor. Market rates are approximately \$3 per pound for tuna, \$9 per pound for lobster, and \$4 per pound for bottomfish. He said that individual fishers who sell door-to-door may offer lower prices than roadside vendors, though exact figures are not always available.

Itibus said that prices among roadside vendors are generally consistent, but individual sellers may undercut these rates.

Muña said that onaga was recently purchased directly from a fisher at \$11 per pound on Guam, which is also the rate typically sold to restaurants on the island.

Weaver said that fuel prices remain over \$5 per gallon, which contributes to the variability in fish pricing and reflects broader economic challenges facing the CNMI.

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

Dean Palacios, CNMI DFW provided the agency report. CNMI's inaugural Fisher's Recognition Week began with a proclamation signed on May 30, 2025 and included multiple outreach and community activities such as school presentations, boat shows, cultural exhibits, a family fun day, and a spearfishing dive rescue course. Based on strong participation, the event is expected to continue annually, though future timing may vary. Gov. Palacios signed an EO designating coral reefs as critical natural infrastructure. This directive aims to enhance conservation, restoration, enforcement, and funding efforts. A working group is currently developing implementation strategies.

Progress has resumed following earlier delays in grant processing and staffing. Both shore-based and boat-based surveys are ongoing, though some data compilation is still in progress. Commercial Purchase Reports have also experienced delays due to staff turnover. The Fishery Independent Survey and Habitat Assessment (FISHA) survey activities have advanced with additional staff training in species identification and diving. New surveys are underway and

previous data are being compiled. Temporary slowdowns are expected while the project lead participates in NOAA's Coral Reef Monitoring Program. The Movement and Connectivity Grant is a two-year program commenced in 2025 with a new fisheries biologist. Forty fish, primarily from the Managaha Marine Protected Area, have been tagged. The project will provide data on fish movement as tagged specimens are recaptured.

He said Two new FADs (KK and LL) have been deployed near Saipan, with two additional units (DE and EE) planned for Rota. The CNMI continues to use a consistent FAD design. In the Enforcement Program, routine patrols continue. A recent milestone included the swearing-in of enforcement officers by a CNMI Superior Court judge. He also said the embankment leading to the Outer Cove Marina has been completed and was funded under the U.S. National Park Service under American Memorial Park. The Smiling Cove Marine is managed by the Boating Access Program under the DFW. Planning is underway for the dredging of Smiling Cove Marina, which suffers from four decades of sediment buildup.

Progress has been made in collecting and analyzing otoliths and gonads from locally caught fish with the Life History Program. These specimens have been featured in educational outreach events, where students used microscopes to examine biological samples. In the Coral Reef Management Program, with the addition of a new fisheries biologist, activities have resumed. The program has launched its first Baited Remote Underwater Video Surveys (BRUVS), which use GoPro-equipped frames to record fish activity without diver interference. Structure-from-Motion (SfM) mapping is also underway, pending acquisition of computing equipment delayed by procurement issues. Recent months have included reports of three sea turtle strandings in the Sea Turtle Monitoring Program. One turtle with a cracked carapace was released after being assessed near the Crowne Plaza area. Another was flipped on its back at Ladder Beach and successfully rescued. A third turtle was found inland under a vehicle; the incident is under investigation. In addition, six nests and three nesting females are currently being monitored.

Weaver said he had concerns about the frequent loss of FADs, noting that fishermen struggle when FADs go missing despite having their coordinates. He inquired whether a longer-lasting FAD design exists—particularly one capable of withstanding typhoons and other severe weather conditions common to the region.

Palacios said that while he is not fully familiar with all design specifications or comparative durability studies, he would follow up with the relevant staff to obtain further details. He noted that different FAD designs are in use across jurisdictions, including ongoing efforts in Guam to test alternative configurations.

Muña added that in at least one known instance, FAD loss was attributed to vessel interference—specifically, boats crossing over the mooring lines and causing tangles. She said American Samoa's use of satellite-tracking technology for their FAD program, enables tracking of fish schools but not necessarily the devices themselves once lost. She said CNMI should explore similar recovery options. She also said one FAD in the region had remained in place for seven years, demonstrating that long-term durability is possible.

Palacios said a FAD was reported missing by a fisher and it was later located during a follow-up effort, suggesting that occasional difficulties may stem from search limitations rather than actual loss.

Itibus asked for clarification on the materials and depths used in anchoring CNMI's FADs. Palacios said he would need to talk to CNMI DFW staff member Leon Guerrero for those technical details.

Guthertz asked about the outcome of a sea turtle found underneath a vehicle.

Palacios said that the turtle was ultimately unharmed. It was tagged and released, though the CNMI Department of Public Safety is reportedly leading an investigation into the incident.

Guthertz asked whether the U.S. Coast Guard could assist in locating and recovering lost FADs, particularly if their positions are known.

Lt. Cmdr. Guanci stated he would look into the appropriate mechanism but noted that lost FADs could be reported as hazards to navigation, which would trigger a Notice to Mariners. As for recovery, he explained that the Coast Guard currently has limited vessel assets in the area and lacks a buoy tender based in Guam, which may affect their ability to safely retrieve FADs depending on size and towing feasibility.

3. 2024 Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report

Remington presented the CNMI-specific updates for the 2024 Mariana Archipelago Annual SAFE Report. The estimated total catch of BMUS in the CNMI has declined over the past several years, with values decreasing from approximately 56,000 pounds to 13,000 pounds, and most recently to 5,000 pounds in 2024. This trend is primarily attributed to data limitations rather than a true reduction in fishing activity or stock availability. The CNMI DFW experienced significant challenges in conducting creel surveys in 2024 due to staffing turnover and logistical barriers, including delays in fuel acquisition and vehicle repairs. As a result, survey coverage was limited and unable to validate actual catch levels, which are believed to be higher than reported. CPUE, expressed as pounds per trip and pounds per gear hour, also declined to the lowest levels since 2010–2011. However, he said that this measure may not accurately reflect fishery conditions given the constraints in data collection. The number of creel survey days and fisher interviews conducted in 2024 reached historic lows. Administrative delays and an insufficient number of trained staff significantly affected survey execution and, consequently, the accuracy of reported estimates.

Commercial reporting continued to face issues despite the longstanding requirement for vendor submissions. While most vendors have been reporting since the early 2000s, compliance remains inconsistent due to high market turnover. This situation is further complicated by a lack of consistent enforcement and challenges in ensuring all new vendors are aware of their reporting obligations. Remington said that the economic downturn has reduced commercial fishing activity, contributing to further declines in reported catch.

Performance in the noncommercial sector is estimated using differences between creel survey results and dealer-reported catch. Based on current figures, there appears to be an increase in the proportion of bottomfish being sold in recent years. Environmental observations from fishers indicated increased rainfall, elevated water temperatures, and potential impacts from seismic activity, though these were anecdotal and not linked to formal measurements.

Socioeconomic indicators showed that the CNMI had the highest fuel prices among the island areas, with costs rising further from 2023 to 2024. Although commercial receipt data

showed a slight increase in the total pounds of fish sold, total revenue decreased due to declining market prices. The cost of fishing trips declined, likely as a result of reduced effort and resource use. No protected species concerns were reported in association with the CNMI bottomfish fishery. Ocean and climate indicators for the region were reported to be consistent with those observed in Guam.

Muña asked about the creel survey variability across jurisdictions, focusing on the number of interviews and survey days.

Carvalho, NMFS PIFSC, said creel surveys play a central role in generating data for stock assessments and that reduced survey coverage limits the reliability of CPUE and total catch estimates.

Marc Nadon, NMFS PIFSC, said data indicates that the CNMI typically achieves only about two interviews per survey day, falling significantly below expected levels and affecting the ability to conduct robust assessments.

Itibus asked why the CNMI had fewer designated survey days than Guam or American Samoa.

Nadon said these numbers were determined based on port access and agency capacity, rather than solely on statistical design.

Hongguang Ma, PIFSC creel survey statistician, said that the original survey allocations were developed collaboratively with local agencies based on resource availability and stratification needs. While the statistical design has been validated, its effectiveness is undermined when actual survey days fall short or when intercepts are minimal.

Muña asked whether survey schedules could be adjusted to target known periods of high fishing activity, rather than relying strictly on randomized scheduling. She said that such modifications could increase intercept rates and data quality.

Jones, PIFSC, said such changes would require additional funding, staffing, and planning—particularly to address safety concerns for surveyors working during evening hours. He said these issues were discussed during a January 2024 visit to CNMI by NOAA and Council staff.

Nadon said there were two broad options for improving fishery-dependent data collection in the territories. The first is to refine and support the existing creel survey framework, retaining the catch-rate times effort approach while adding supplementary tools such as secondary interviews, increased biosampling, fish photo mats and enhanced data quality protocols. The second option involves a more comprehensive redesign that deprioritizes total catch estimation and focuses on length and CPUE data collection. This approach could include targeted sampling during peak fishing activity and the adoption of census-style methods in fisheries with very low participation. Such strategies would allow for greater flexibility and could improve data quality in situations where traditional methods are no longer effective.

Simonds said members should review the Executive and Budget Committee meeting report from June 2025 for additional context. She said that while the current survey design is sound in theory, its success depends on achieving sufficient encounter rates and consistent implementation.

4. 2025 Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Bottomfish Management Unit Species Stock Assessment/Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review Report

Bohaboy, NMFS PIFSC, presented on the updated stock assessment for the CNMI BMUS. The update was based heavily on the 2019 benchmark stock assessment and as an update assessment, it retained the same data sources, analytical methods, and population models used in 2019, with the primary change being the inclusion of more recent data from 2018 to 2023. The foundational data source remained the boat-based creel survey, and the assessment model was re-run after incorporating new CPUE data. The 2023 data was used as the terminal year because the 2024 data were limited to a small number of interviews collected between July and October. This limited and uneven distribution of data would have introduced uncertainty and potential bias had it been included.

She said that for the years 2018 through 2023, catch estimates were incorporated. Catch data from 2000 to 2017 were taken directly from the 2019 benchmark without re-estimation. When boat-based creel surveys produced low estimates for certain years, commercial purchase receipts were used instead. For example, the 2018 catch estimate relied on commercial receipts due to a limited number of creel survey interviews. The assessment recalculated the index using the new data, excluding 2018 due to insufficient interviews. She noted that the standardized CPUE from the update aligned closely with the original benchmark values from 2000 to 2017, suggesting consistency in model performance. The 2023 results indicated that the stock was not overfished and not subject to overfishing. Most of the confidence interval for 2023 fell in the “green” area of the Kobe Plot, well above the overfished threshold (70% biomass for MSY) and below the overfishing threshold. A comparative figure between the 2019 and 2025 assessments showed that the addition of new data reduced uncertainty and indicated slightly lower fishing mortality. She said under the assumption of a 40% probability of overfishing ($P^* = 0.4$), the projected constant annual catch through 2030 was estimated at 71,000 pounds. This was a reduction from the 2019 benchmark projection of 84,000 pounds but remained above the three-year average catch observed in CNMI.

Bohaboy said that the only substantive change in the updated assessment was the addition of new data. The model behaved consistently with the 2019 benchmark, the stock was not overfished or experiencing overfishing in 2023, and the new five-year total allowable catch projection was set at 71,000 pounds.

Chaloupka, SSC member, presented the summary report of the WPSAR review of the 2025 Stock Assessment Update for the CNMI BMUS complex. He said that the review panel consisted of himself, Leon Guerrero and Itano. While pelagic trolling dominates fishing activity in CNMI, bottomfishing remains culturally and socioeconomically significant. The importance of robust management for the bottomfish fishery formed the basis for the updated assessment and its review.

He said that this was an update rather than a benchmark stock assessment, meaning there were limitations on methodological changes and scope. The update was based on the same modeling structure used in the 2019 benchmark assessment and incorporated six additional years of data (2018–2023), primarily derived from boat-based creel surveys. These additions allowed for greater precision in stock status estimation without altering core modeling approaches. The stock complex under review included 13 bottomfish species. As with the 2019 benchmark, the updated assessment found the stock to be neither overfished nor subject to overfishing. This outcome, supported by 24 years of catch and CPUE data, provided a strong foundation for

ongoing management. The update reduced the projected annual catch from approximately 82,000 pounds in the previous assessment to 71,000 pounds under a 40% probability of overfishing ($P^* = 0.4$). This reduction was attributed to factors such as possible declines in productivity, ocean temperature changes, and recent environmental variability.

The first six Terms of Reference (TORs), which assess the adequacy of data, methods, and uncertainty characterization, yielded no negative findings. Therefore, TOR 7, which would apply only in the case of disagreements, was deemed irrelevant. TOR 8 focused on forward-looking recommendations and was the primary source of panel suggestions. Under TOR 8, he identified several high-priority recommendations. First, the panel urged future exploration of ways to reduce the number of species modeled in the complex. Rather than assessing all 13 species as a single unit, the suggestion was to group species with similar population trends or characteristics. This type of data reduction could lead to more biologically meaningful assessments. Second, the panel emphasized the need to enhance local capacity for data collection in CNMI, especially to support future benchmark assessments. Strengthening local infrastructure and training would help ensure more reliable and consistent data gathering. Among the medium-priority recommendations, shark depredation was highlighted as an important but unresolved issue affecting catch rates. This challenge, which is relevant globally, could distort estimates of fishing mortality and needs to be better understood. Another medium-priority item was the expansion of creel surveys to include areas beyond Saipan—specifically Tinian and Rota—though it was acknowledged that this would depend on resource availability. In the lower-priority category, he mentioned the potential benefit of a socioeconomic assessment of the CNMI bottomfish fishery. Understanding the fishery’s contribution to the local economy could help contextualize management decisions and improve communication with stakeholders.

He said the list of recommendations presented in the summary report was not exhaustive; further details were available in the three individual WPSAR panelist reports appended to the full review document. The only proposed addition to the draft stock assessment update was a new figure showing how species composition within the BMUS complex has changed over time. This could provide insight into the relative importance and dynamics of individual species. He said the panel’s consensus that the updated assessment constitutes BSIA and supports its use as a basis for Council decision-making and SSC recommendations for risk-based ACLs.

C. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations

1. Mariana Archipelago Advisory Panel

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

The Guam AP recommends the Council explore the feasibility of developing a longline fishery (resource availability) and market (local, export, transshipment) for tropical tunas in the Mariana Islands.

The Guam AP recommends the Council request DAWR look at SPC FAD designs, including the use of biodegradable and environmentally sustainable materials, in the development of future FADs to provide longevity and reduce the cost of deployment.

Richard Farrell, CNMI AP vice chair, presented the AP meeting reports and recommendations.

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

Regarding Mariana Archipelago data, the CNMI AP recommends the Council inquire with PIFSC on the availability of recent mapping activities in the Mariana Islands for CNMI fishers to utilize when conducting fishing trips in the area.

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

2. Plan Team

There were no Plan Team recommendations for the Mariana Archipelago.

3. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee

There were no FIAC recommendations for the Mariana Archipelago.

4. Scientific and Statistical Committee

Chaloupka presented the SSC report and recommendations.

Regarding the CNMI Bottomfish Stock Assessment, the SSC concurs with the WPSAR review and deems the 2025 Stock Assessment Update of the BMUS of the CNMI as BSIA for management use by the Council.

5. Military Expansion Standing Committee

Military Expansion Standing Committee recommendations were reported under Program Planning.

D. Public Comment

Farrell said he had concerns regarding the recently released 2025 Revised Draft EIS for the Commonwealth Joint Military Training. He said that he had only begun to review the document but noted potential impacts that would likely raise concerns for the CNMI in the near future. Specifically, he mentioned possible adverse effects on commercial and recreational fisheries, shore-based fishing activities in the northern part of the island, and disruptions to commercial shipping routes between Saipan, Tinian and Rota. He said that these issues warranted attention moving forward.

Simonds said she acknowledges the concerns raised and confirmed that the Council had received an official invitation to comment on the revised draft EIS. She said Council staff would conduct a thorough review of the document and provide follow-up once their assessment was complete.

E. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding the CNMI bottomfish updated stock assessment, the Council:

1. **Endorses the SSC's BSIA determination of the 2025 stock assessment for fishery management use and directed staff to develop potential ABC and ACLs for initial action at the 204th meeting in September 2025.**
2. **Requests NMFS PIFSC provide the stock assessment results and reports in a way that is digestible for community consumption and encourage participation in data collection and career pathways in fisheries science.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

Regarding Mariana Archipelago data, the Council:

3. **Requests NMFS PIFSC provide the data and recent mapping activities in the Mariana Islands for CNMI fishers to utilize when conducting fishing trips in the area.**

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

Regarding Guam bottomfish and ACLs, the Council:

4. **Recommends NMFS apply the new ACL as the basis for the catch evaluation. The catches were below their respective ACLs except for the Guam BMUS where the three-year average catch was 31,426 pounds. The Council and PIRO are working on the new ACL specification rulemaking package with the Council taking final action in December 2024 at its 201st meeting with a new ACL at 34,500 pounds.**

Malloy asked if the new ACL is being used in advance of the final action, or is it a suggestion.

Yamada said the recommendation came out of the plan team when reviewing the fishery performance for Guam. For 2024, the fishery did exceed the rebuilding plan ACL of 34,000 pounds, but the three-year average was 31,000 pounds, which is above the current ACL although the Council took final action to increase the ACL to 34,500 pounds. This was done to make sure the AMs under the final action ACL or the rebuilding plan are implemented rather than what is in the regulations at this time. The original rebuilding plan has a different suite of AMs, which includes a higher performance metric, which is if the ACL is reached or is exceeded, there will be an indefinite fishery closure in federal waters until the stock is rebuilt. The Council took final action to revise the rebuilding plans in the case the fishery does reach the ACL, then it would not trigger an in-season closure, and then it will take the most recent three-year average. If that three-year average is exceeded, there will be a deduction to the following year compared to the original higher performance metric under the rebuilding plan.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Perez.

Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

Regarding Guam fisheries, the Council:

5. **Directs staff to explore the feasibility of developing a longline fishery (resource availability) and market (local, export, transshipment) for tropical tunas in the Mariana Islands.**

- 6. Requests Guam DAWR explore SPC FAD designs, including the use of biodegradable and environmentally sustainable materials, in the development of future FADs to provide longevity and a potentially reduced cost of deployment.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Perez.

Motion passed.

Regarding military expansion efforts, the Council:

- 7. Directs staff to review the CNMI Joint Military Training EIS with the Council's Advisory Bodies and the fishing community in order to inform the Council's comments on potential fishery impacts ahead of the Aug. 20, 2025, public comment deadline. The Council further directed staff to also provide those comments to the CNMI DLNR and the Guam DOAG prior to the deadline.**

Soliai said this committee was important for the Council. Although American Samoa was not a part of this committee, he said that Guam is often referred to as the tip of the spear. With that spear, a strong base is needed and American Samoa should be considered the base because without a strong base, the spear will be useless. Being the farthest U.S. territory in the South Pacific, it is a prime opportunity to highlight the importance of American Samoa in the overall discussion. American Samoa is strategically placed in the south, has the deepest harbor and can support the regional maritime security for the military. Hence, there is always the advocacy for the placement of a USCG asset within the region. American Samoa can house key fisheries and ocean resources for their importance for supporting the military and food security and economic stability, representing the U.S. sovereignty within that part of the region, which is usually contested, closely located to other Pacific Island countries that have close affiliations and ties with China. The territory also provides resiliency and a rooted presence within Oceania.

Guthertz said that American Samoa be a member of the committee because it will also be influenced at some point with the military expansion.

Weaver asked if this is the right time to include American Samoa into the working group.

Sword said this matter will be discussed later.

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed.

XI. American Samoa Archipelago

A. Motu Lipoti

Sword presented the Motu Lipoti, beginning with the 125th anniversary of the signing of the Deed of Cession between the United States and the Chiefs of American Samoa. The event was celebrated locally and in Washington, DC, coinciding with the signing of an EO opening the 50- to 200-nm zone in the PRIA to commercial fishing. This was broadly supported in American Samoa due to its economic benefits for the U.S.-flagged purse seine fleet and cannery jobs, despite some opposition. He said Flag Day celebrations included the Fautasi Regatta and participation from the U.S. Navy, which used the event to open a local recruiting center and that StarKist contributed support for the event.

He said American Samoa hosted the Steinlager I‘a Lapo‘a fishing tournament, with participants from Samoa and New Zealand. Local teams did not place in the top rankings, but the event drew regional participation. There are also infrastructure improvements funded by the American Rescue Plan Act include plans to rebuild the Port Administration building, repair dock infrastructure, and design floating docks for sportfishing. Two new tugboats were recently added to the port fleet. Sword said StarKist reported operational updates including expansion into pet food production, fuel cost reduction efforts, and consideration of worker housing and technical training programs.

He also said Congresswoman Amata Coleman Radewagen continues efforts to address IUU fishing and supports increased USCG presence in the territory. Regarding deep-sea mining, public opposition remains strong, with the governor’s EO against it still in effect. The territorial government emphasized the need for community outreach before any decisions are made. The territory is also pursuing SIDS designation to enhance competitiveness for the U.S.-flagged fleet, which currently lacks the licensing advantages available to other nations.

Soliai said the EO allowing U.S.-flagged vessels to fish in the U.S. EEZ around the PRIA was important as roughly 70% of fish landed at the local cannery comes from these vessels. He noted his familial connection to the original Deed of Cession and highlighted its inclusion of traditional marine areas, which may be relevant in future ocean governance discussions.

Simonds noted that the Deeds of Cession are included under “other applicable law,” providing legal recognition.

B. American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources Report

Domingo Ochavillo, DMWR, presented the agency report and started with the use of various low-technology fishing gears intercepted in the shore-based creel survey. During the second quarter, approximately 8,400 pounds of fish and invertebrates were caught. The five most commonly caught species included surgeonfish, lobster, and trevally, with most catches made using spear-snorkel methods. The boat-based creel survey data followed, showing signs of increased fishing activity, potentially linked to post-COVID-19 recovery, with some fishermen using pandemic relief funds to purchase boats. The dominant gear types reported were bottomfish, spearfishing, and trolling. American Samoa currently has only seven fishing vessels, with four active in bottomfishing, making it a significantly smaller fishery in comparison to those in Hawai‘i, Guam, and Saipan. Shallow water bottomfishing remains prevalent, and key species observed included surgeonfish, parrotfish, lobster, skipjack tuna, yellowfin, dogtooth tuna, barracuda, trevally and rainbow runner. Images presented included staff measuring fish dockside.

He also reported on the DMWR commercial invoice monitoring program, which involves monthly data collection from approximately 76 fish vendors. Surgeonfish, parrotfish, lobster, squirrelfish, and grouper were among the most frequently sold species. Notably, there was little to no bottomfish sold through these vendors, attributed to the bottomfishing community’s preference for roadside sales due to low prices offered by vendors. The monitoring also captured data on imported seafood, including pompano, tilapia, swai, and salmon. Additionally, about 10,000 pounds of pelagic fish were brought in during the quarter as non-target catch from longline operations, primarily by foreign vessels. These included species such as black marlin, blue marlin, swordfish, and wahoo. The PPT has previously raised concerns regarding species identification for marlins.

Ochavillo said American Samoa currently maintains five deep-water FADs, three of which are equipped with satellite buoys — donated by Zunibal. Satellite imagery indicated tuna activity near these devices, although the fish appeared to be at deeper depths. DMWR is collaborating with Zunibal to conduct experimental longlining to verify the presence of tuna and refine detection models. One FAD (FAD B) was successfully retrieved after it began drifting toward the South Banks. Under the Key Reef Species Program, DMWR continued supporting FAD-related operations and assisted the Wildlife Division with marine mammal and seabird surveys. The department is concluding a life history project, conducted in partnership with Poseidon Fishery, which aims to develop species-specific life history information for five target species.

He said the Community-Based Fisheries Management Program also had continued activity. Photos shared included staff participation in Management Grant training held in Saipan in January, and the successful cultivation of giant clams donated by Samoa. Currently, around 500 clams remain, and efforts are underway to explore ecotourism opportunities linked to their conservation. The program also welcomed Fagasa Village, located in the northern region, as a new participant. Additional activities included rain garden planning in partnership with the Faga'alu Village Council and the Coral Reef Advisory Group.

Other updates included coordination with the Palmyra Island FAD Watch Program to initiate a drifting FAD retrieval project, with anticipated funding support from SPC. Despite delays in implementation, initial data from Rose Atoll, provided by Peck, indicated an average of four FAD strandings per year over the past decade. The department emphasized the significance of addressing FAD stranding — particularly from purse seiners — as a regional concern and is participating in efforts to collect more robust data on this issue. DMWR is also preparing for stormwater management and watershed evaluation trainings, scheduled for July. These will be conducted in collaboration with Horsley-Witten and focus on green infrastructure solutions in Nu'uuli, Ofu and Olosega villages.

The DMWR's Tuna Policy Project, under the DOI, is in its initial stages. Stakeholder meetings are planned before December. Visual documentation included Council staff coordinator Felix Penalosa working with engineers from the Department of Public Works to assess boat ramps and identify repair needs. Lastly, the Enforcement Division reported ongoing efforts including foreign vessel activity monitoring under the MSA, container inspections under the SIMP, and land and sea patrols in cooperation with the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa.

Muña inquired about the satellite program used by DMWR to track FADs, specifically asking whether the program requires a subscription fee.

Ochavillo said that DMWR is currently engaged in a research project comparing tuna detection data from satellite buoys with results from vertical longlining operations. As part of this collaboration, the satellite buoy provider, Zunibal, donated the satellite buoys at no cost to support the research effort. While the buoys themselves were provided free of charge, DMWR is responsible for covering minimal subscription fees associated with data access.

C. 2024 American Samoa Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report

Remington presented the updated American Samoa Annual SAFE Report covering 2024. The archipelagic fisheries bottomfish comprises 11 BMUS. In 2024, there was a notable catch

increase up to 12,000 pounds which is substantial considering recent years where catches of 5,000 and 3,000 pounds. Shore-based catch remains a significant component of this, comprising about 20% of the total. Remington reminded the Council the report did not track catch of all 11 BMUS in some against the ACL. Nine species are based on ACL. None of the species exceeded their ACL and thus there are no averages during 2024, the first year out of the rebuilding plan after the 2019 stock assessment for BMUS.

He said commercial data was very low and does not represent the full picture. There is non-disclosed data for some species since there are less than three vendors reporting sales of bottomfish. BMUS are primarily being sold by the roadside instead of in formal markets. There is an ongoing investigation about the interaction between secondary pelagic species caught by the longliners that are not going to the cannery and might enter the formal markets and whether those are supplanting bottomfish species since pelagic species are at a slightly lower price and tend to be a little more desirable. There is not enough space for bottomfish in the markets so many fishermen sell their catch roadside and getting better prices with a good demand. Data has either been non-disclosed or there were zero recorded commercial sales of some species. The full picture is not being captured for bottomfish commercial activity due to roadside sales and fish given away to family and selling to friends.

An increase in fishing trips and gear hours for bottomfish was noted during 2024 resulting in an increase in CPUE. CPUE is a useful index used to measure how efficient fishing is. In 2024, there was a slight increase from 2023 due to catch increasing than effort did. There are also species that are not MUS but are important components of the ecosystem and are being monitored to make sure everything is going well with the ecosystem. The creel survey data show the humpback snapper (*Lutjanus gibbus*) as the most harvested species in commercial data and was the exact same as in 2023, noting there are consistencies with the ECS in American Samoa. Species on a species-specific basis are currently being monitored and managed. Remington said the Council recently took final action to revise the species list and will likely notice species were focused on the deep-water snappers predominantly harvested in federal waters. The current species list does have some species that are harvested in territorial waters, such as the uku.

He said efforts to track commercial fishery performance are being tracked more robustly in the SAFE report. There is an agreed-upon method by the plan team to do so, and it is taking total estimated catch from the creel surveys less the dealer reported catch of that species complex. Sometimes species are recorded as higher groups or taxonomic level and might be called their scientific names or just called bottomfish. There were some errors in the creel survey data with species identifications that were fixed. An additional data stream that could provide some insight into what is happening in the noncommercial fishery which is in the creel surveys. When surveyors are interviewing fishers, they ask if they intend to sell any of their catch. That data can be incorporated. The intent to sell does follow the total estimated catch from creel surveys but are not consistent with the dealer reported commercial receipt book data. This is because even if fishers are indicating they intend to sell their catch, they are not doing so in formal markets where they are going to be captured by commercial receipt books. This might explain the discrepancy from 2010 to 2020. In recent years, about 75% of catch is sold. Based on available data, an estimated 25% of bottomfish harvest are sold. In talks with fishers, this is not reflective of reality with a large proportion sold and not being captured.

Remington said fisher observations are also being captured during the informal AP meetings and the annual summit hosted by PIFG and supported by the PIFSC with the most recent held Jan. 28, 2025. Information such as the ocean conditions, how the bite is, any notable things for fishing operations, and more. With weather, fishers reported 2024 was characterized

by strong wind and rains, a hotter climate and fewer birds around. On the water, there were king tides as well as the tuna moving deeper, more seaweed found closer to shore. There is no real central market. Roadside sales are dominating the fishery. There are unpredictable prices which can create instability for fishers.

Regarding operations, fishers noted there has been a lack of ice and the cost of fuel was high. There is limited fuel in Tutuila. And for years, the region reported continued interaction with sharks. But during 2024, it was especially noted there was increased depredation. There was an increase in small marlins in the pelagic fisheries and there were weak runs for palolo and *atulai* as well. With socioeconomics, efforts to capture revenue, costs of fishing, fish prices, and how all those change over time. The cost of fuel price per gallon showed a slight increase since 2022. The price of fuel between 2015 to 2020, was more than a dollar per gallon cheaper.

He said what is impacting the fishery is fishers deciding whether to go out. Many fishers are becoming more intentional about when they go fishing because their intention is to sell their catch and want to know if the trip is worthwhile. Many fishers are talking with other fishers to understand when the bite is good. Some wait for ideal conditions. During 2021 to 2023, data was confidential since there were less than three sources reporting and was not captured in the graphs. An increase in bottomfish trip cost was seen in 2023, but relatively decreased overall due to lower fuel usage. Folks are becoming intentional about how they fish and may take fewer trips with the trips being shorter. Fuel usage is declining even though it comprises the majority of the costs for a fishing trip. Other prominent costs are ice, followed by bait and chum. Shark depredation caused reports of gear loss.

Protected species were tracked but were not as big a consideration for the archipelagic or insular fisheries. They had minimal impacts on protected species, especially bottomfish. Bottomfishing is a highly selective gear type and fishing method. No notable increase in recent years that would suggest a need for a closer look on the fishery, especially with interactions with protected species. Catches of oceanic whitetip sharks are being monitored closely in the bottomfish fishery although there has been no reports of interactions in the fishery in American Samoa.

Environmental changes are being tracked as well that could be relevant to fishing. Usually basin-wide indicators and El Niño or atmospheric carbon dioxide levels that are relevant across the Pacific Islands Region are presented in the SAFE Reports but will be done at a later date. A significant increase in sea surface temperatures of about 0.02 degrees Celsius per year and the 2024 average temperature was over 29 degrees Celsius, a positive temperature anomaly of over 0.7 degrees Celsius as a mean average. It showed three quarters of a degree Celsius hotter than it was 30 to 40 years ago. With coral thermal stress exposure, tracking shows degree hearing weeks and are studying if it has been hot enough to start impacting corals. Ocean color is also being tracked, which is the measure of chlorophyll-a concentration. This is used because it is a measure of ocean productivity. Phytoplankton form the base of the food web and means if there are more phytoplankton there will be more that will feed on it and will work up to the species that are important to fisheries. In 2024, there were weak positive anomalies and means there was more chlorophyll than typically expected with relative to a baseline of about 30 to 40 years ago and everything was roughly in line with historical average.

Remington said tracking is done on meaningful indicators like rainfall through the year, sea level rise, and things of that nature. The reports will be accessible at www.wpcouncildata.org. There is a large working group evaluating and revamping the structure and content of the annual SAFE reports, which has existed in the current format for about 10

years. Ways to streamline the reports are being looked at to make them more user friendly and allow them to find exactly what they are looking for more efficiently. A lot of content has been added to the SAFE reports over the years without anything being removed. The working group is looking at what is important to the Council, the SSC, and the AP and make sure those are retained. The SSC asked if there is a way to present a dashboard of meaningful changes as reported in the annual SAFE reports that can be provided at a glance. Ideas are being solicited to see if there are better ways to provide a one-page snapshot and advise on what happened in the region or the island areas in the past year. There is also ongoing investigation of pelagic fish entering markets that may or may not be decreasing desire for bottomfish. More relevant to the pelagic fishery, monitoring is ongoing on the continued decrease in mahimahi catches. Speculation shows this may be due to climate. The reports moved to specific catch monitoring for bottomfish. This is changing so next year's SAFE reports may be on a new group of bottomfish focusing on the deep-water snappers.

Soliai said this was discussed at the FDCRC meeting this past Friday with respect to data and the integrity of the data. He said he is glad discussion is ongoing on how to improve the SAFE reports and obtaining data not only from American Samoa but from other territories as well. The integration or correlation between the SAFE report and fisher observations show there is a strong relationship between what is being reported and what the fishermen are saying.

D. Advisory Group Report and Recommendations

1. American Samoa Advisory Panel

There were no AP recommendations for American Samoa.

2. Plan Team

There were no Plan Team recommendations for American Samoa.

3. Fishing Industry Advisory Committee

There were no FIAC recommendations for American Samoa.

4. Scientific and Statistical Committee

There were no SSC recommendations for American Samoa.

E. Public Comment

Ilaoa provided public comment regarding American Samoa's designation as a small island developing state. He emphasized the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of what the designation means for the territory, particularly for the tuna industry and the potential responsibilities placed on the local government. Ilaoa expressed concern over the ongoing lawsuit challenging the proclamation that reopened portions of the PRIA to commercial fishing. He noted the potential for the lawsuit to delay or undermine the intended benefits of the presidential order, which he said should support the local economy. He referenced past legal challenges, such as those to the large vessel prohibited area amendment, and warned that American Samoa cannot afford another prolonged legal process. He urged the Council to continue supporting the American Samoa Government in navigating the SIDS designation and acknowledged Council member Soliai's leadership in the process. Ilaoa also stressed the importance of sending a strong, experienced, and well-prepared delegation to the WCPFC,

stating that this was not a time for on-the-job training and that alignment between the local team, U.S. delegation, and industry partners was essential.

F. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding impacts to fisheries from deep sea mining in American Samoa, the Council:

- 1. Directed staff to work with the fishing community in American Samoa to review the information available on deep-sea mining in preparation for responding to the unsolicited lease for offshore mining in the U.S. EEZ around American Samoa.**

Muña expressed interest in reviewing any information that the staff compiles from its engagement with the American Samoa community on deep-sea mining. She requested that the information be shared with Guam to help inform their understanding of the issue and support future decision making.

Moved by Weaver; seconded by Soliai.
Motion passed.

XII. Administrative Matters

A. Financial Reports

Simonds referred members to the financial reports included in the meeting briefing materials, which covered the Administrative, Coral Reef, IRA, and SFF awards.

Regarding the Administrative Award, the Council has received \$1,815,00 to date, representing 45% of the annual budget. During the semiannual CCC meeting, it was noted that funding would be distributed in tranches. The Council anticipates receiving the additional \$2,210,000 in three-month increments over the upcoming period.

For the Coral Reef Award, the 2023 award is scheduled to end in September 2025. Under the 2024 award, expenditures, including staff salaries and fringe benefits, are currently supporting the program's dedicated staff. Beginning in 2026, the Coral Reef program funding will be awarded competitively, and staff support will no longer be included as a dedicated line item in the award.

Simonds reported the Council has expended \$114,000 under the initial IRA award. Current IRA contracts were discussed earlier in the meeting.

SFF XII has been extended through 2027, and the Council is requesting an extension of SFF XIII (American Samoa and CNMI) through 2027. The SFF American Samoa 2022 and 2023 awards both expire in 2026. The SFF American Samoa 2024 award, which totals \$353,000, has no expenditures to date and expires in 2027. The SFF CNMI 2022 award expires in 2027, with \$359,000 in remaining committed funds. The SFF CNMI 2024 award, totaling \$748,000, also has no expenditures to date. The SFF PRIA award is scheduled to end in 2025, and the Council expects to fully expend the funds by that time.

B. Administrative Reports

Elle Granger, Council staff, introduced Goldee Nastor, who joined the Council April 1, 2025, as the new fiscal administrator. The annual audit remains on track for completion by Sept. 30, 2025. The Council is still awaiting the announcement of appointments for nominations, with

the relevant table included in briefing materials, along with the recusal determination for Council members.

C. Council Family Changes

DeMello reported on membership changes to the Plan Teams and the Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee. The following individuals have been removed from the APT due to retirement or changes in position: Sean Hanser, Frank Parrish, Tye Kindinger, Rhane Malae, and Frank Villagomez. Additionally, Sean Felise and Kristen Leong have been removed from the PPT. At the request of PIFSC, Danika Kleiber has been nominated to replace Kristen Leong, and Johanna Wren is being proposed for addition to the PPT. For the American Samoa Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee, the following nongovernmental organizations are being recommended for inclusion: Le Vasa Pathways, Finafinau and Fatoata.

D. Report on Council Coordination Committee

Sword reported the first CCC meeting under the new administration was held May 13-15, 2025, in New Bedford, Mass. The meeting featured open and candid discussions among the eight councils, with southern councils expressing concerns about inadequate interaction and support from their Science Centers. NOAA leadership emphasized a unified approach to implementing the EOs, particularly EO 14276, and highlighted strategies like the America First Seafood Strategy and the need to support Pacific longline fleets. Evan Howell was introduced as the new NOAA Chief Scientist, bringing Pacific experience and a focus on engaging directly with fishermen. Increasing uncertainty in fisheries science and its impact on harvest levels and stock assessments was acknowledged, prompting consideration of simpler and more adaptable approaches.

Budget discussions underscored the importance of productivity and return on investment, with a clear message that traditional operations and staffing structures must evolve. Legislatively, only a small percentage of introduced bills become law, underscoring the challenges in effecting policy change. Concerns were raised about recent Commission decisions and the need to regain lost influence under new leadership. International and domestic regulatory issues were also discussed, including the BBNJ agreement and lack of global support on key priorities like seamount protections.

The National Marine Sanctuaries Act guideline revisions were another point of discussion, with frustration that the councils continue to be treated like the general public despite repeated input. Additional meetings on this issue are expected in the fall. Sword encouraged members to review the full CCC report in their briefing materials to better understand the broader context and expectations for Council operations.

E. Meetings and Workshops

Simonds referred members to the schedule in their briefing materials and highlighted upcoming meetings and events. The Saipan Fishermen's Association will hold its 41st Annual Tournament on July 11–12, followed by a meeting of the WCPFC Northern Committee in Toyama City on July 14–15. American Samoa will host an Educators Workshop on July 30 and August 1, with another session from August 13–21. The WCPFC Science Committee Meeting will be held in Tonga in August. The IATTC meetings are scheduled from August 25 to September 5. Although not yet listed, the FDCRC will meet in early August to review recommendations, for which the report is already available.

In September, the cycle of advisory group meetings will resume in preparation for the SSC meeting on September 9–11 and the Council Meeting on September 15–17, currently planned for Honolulu. The WCPFC Technical and Compliance Committee will meet the week of September 24 in Pohnpei. The October CCC meeting is currently set to be virtual, although subject to change. The IATTC General Meeting is scheduled for the week of October 22, and PICES will meet November 8–14 in Yokohama, Japan, for which the Council previously had strong participation. The Coral Reef Task Force will meet in Puerto Rico, and the State Directors Meeting will take place November 19–20 in New Orleans. The WCPFC meeting is scheduled for December 1–5 in Manila, followed by advisory group meetings, the SSC meeting the week of December 8, and a virtual Council Meeting from December 15–17.

In early 2026, the 44th International Sea Turtle Society Symposium will be held February 28 to March 6 in Kona, and the Annual CCC Meeting is scheduled for May 18–22 in Homer, Alaska.

F. Executive and Budget Standing Committee Report

Sword reported on the Executive and Budget Standing Committee meeting. He highlighted the subject of deep-sea mining, noting its significant issue, especially for American Samoa. Discussions at the Standing Committee meeting emphasized further actions by engaging with the public to keep the skeptics opposed to changes informed of the BOEM leasing process, as well as the ramifications. Sword also noted that many remain unaware of what is happening in the CNMI. Sword mentioned the discussions on the monuments and other items that will be brought up in the reviews.

G. Public Comment

Ilaoa expressed appreciation for the Regional Administrator's support in seeking funding for territorial fishery development. He emphasized the importance of continuing efforts to replace the funds previously generated from the now suspended bigeye tuna quota transfer to the Hawaii Longline Association. While he hoped the new administration might allow a reconsideration of the quota transfers under current EOs, he acknowledged the need to follow the appropriate process. Ilaoa reiterated the mutual benefits of the former arrangement and the importance of maintaining support for territorial fisheries.

H. Council Discussion and Action

Regarding Administrative Matters, the Council:

- 1. Accepted the 203rd Council meeting financial and administrative reports.**
- 2. Requested Island Coordinators to work with the appropriate Territorial offices to provide quarterly status updates and detailed progress reports on Sustainable Fisheries Fund projects that are to be initiated or are experiencing unscheduled delays.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.
Motion passed.

Regarding Council family changes, the Council:

- 3. Appointed the following members to the PPT:**
 - a. Danika Kleiber, NMFS PIFSC SEES, to replace Kirsten Leong.**

b. Johanna Wren, NMFS PIFSC Ecosystem Sciences Division.

4. Appointed the following members to the American Samoa Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee:

- a. Le Vasa Pathways (Nate Ilaoa, Founder)**
- b. Finafinau (Dr. Sabrina Suluai-Mahuka, Founder)**
- c. Fatoata (Vera Peck, Founder)**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Soliai.

Motion passed.

Regarding Sustainable Fisheries Fund and Territorial Fishery Development, the Council:

- 5. Requested NMFS identify alternative sources of funds that were previously sourced from Specified Fishing Agreements for the purpose of fishery development, and allocate disbursement among the three U.S. Pacific Territories. This may also include advocating to revise Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission conservation and management measures to recognize Specified Fishing Agreements (or special arrangements) between the U.S. and the U.S. Pacific Territories, or other sources and mechanisms to generate fishery development funds.**

Moved by Guthertz; seconded by Itibus.

Motion passed with Malloy abstaining.

XIII. Other Business

Jones, PIFSC, provided an update on fishing activity in the Johnston Atoll area since it reopened. He confirmed there have been 19 trips with 81 fishing sets placed within the 50 to 200 nm zone, using approximately 258,000 hooks. The nominal CPUE for bigeye tuna was about 2.75 fish per thousand hooks, with blue and striped marlin at about 0.31. Albacore catch rates were under one per thousand hooks. Additional data are expected in the coming months, especially as the fishing shifts into warmer seasons, and a detailed analysis is planned.

Sword inquired about purse seine activity.

Jones responded that none occurred in the area.

Sword asked Brinkman for an update on the South Pacific Treaty payments and the importance of negotiations and the WCPFC meeting this year for the U.S. positioning.

Brinkman will provide updates via email due to technical issues.

Meeting adjourned.