

The Rose Atoll Marine National Monument

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Talofa Lava,

I write not only as the head of the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources and a Fishery Council Member, but as a son of American Samoa who was born and raised in the villages of Leone and Pava'ia'i, as a father raising children here, and as someone entrusted to represent the Governor's position in federal fisheries matters. In that role, I carry the Governor's request clearly and faithfully. And I state plainly that I personally stand with that position.

I have listened carefully to the concerns raised regarding the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument. I respect the sincerity behind them. We all cherish our ocean. Stewardship is not a slogan for us Samoans – it is our inheritance and our obligation. But we must also be honest about what stewardship truly means.

Today, our local longline fleet consists of only six active vessels owned by American Samoa families. These are not outside corporations. They are fathers, mothers, and extended aiga whose livelihoods depend on access to the ocean that has sustained us for generations. Their vessels employ our people, supply our cannery, and circulate millions of dollars through our local economy. Over the past decade alone, their participation in federal fisheries arrangements has generated more than \$1.4 million in Sustainable Fisheries Fund investments back into our community.

Those funds built infrastructure in Manu'a. They have provided the means to repair ramps and pilings. They supported alia upgrades, scholarships, and workforce training. Two of our own DMWR supervisors are here today because of scholarships provided directly from that funding stream. That is not theory. That is real investment in our people. If we believe in supporting locally owned businesses – supporting our own people – then we must mean it when it is hardest.

The proposed amendment would allow limited access for our local longline and alia vessels seaward of 12 nautical miles around Rose Atoll. It does not eliminate protections. It does not dismantle conservation. It maintains 144 square nautical miles of Marine National Monument protections. It keeps in place all existing federal safeguards for seabirds, turtles, nesting sites, and coral reefs under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. It simply restores a modest measure of fairness.

Before 2009, more than 60 locally owned longline vessels operated within our EEZ. There were no ecological collapses tied to that activity. Today we have six vessels. To argue that six locally owned vessels, operating under the strictest conservation standards in the world, will suddenly devastate Rose Atoll ignores history, science and reality. More importantly, it ignores our own authority as Samoans.

The Deeds of Cession were not casual documents. Our ancestors ceded sovereignty to the United States with a clear expectation that our lands, our culture, and our way of life would be protected. A man I have always admired for both his intellect and immeasurable passion and dedication for the rights of our American Samoa people put it in very simple terms. In an address to the United Nations just nine years ago, Tapa'au Dr. Daniel Aga reminded the international community, the legitimacy of government must be vested in the authority of the people of American Samoa, and self-determination must be rooted in the inextricable link between land, ocean, and the Samoan way of life.

Yet in 2009, more than 3,300 square miles of our traditional fishing grounds were closed with the stroke of a pen in Washington, D.C., without a vote of our people, without giving our people a chance to vote, and without meaningful consultation. Where was the outcry about the Deeds of Cession then? We have invoked our precious Deeds to criticize other fisheries actions taken through the Council process years ago. But when a U.S. President unilaterally closed thousands of square miles of our ocean, there was silence. That inconsistency must be acknowledged.

Opening limited access under the Monument amendment does not mean abandoning conservation. It means restoring a role for the people of American Samoa in managing our waters through the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the Fishery Management Council process. Unlike a unilateral Monument proclamation, the Council process requires public meetings, local input, scientific review, and federal oversight. It is transparent. It is participatory. It allows our Governor, our Legislature, and our fishermen to have a seat at the table. And most importantly, unlike most other federal processes, it is a bottom-up approach giving the people of American Samoa and the rest of the region the opportunity to have their voices heard at every step of the process.

My vote is not about allowing the pillaging of resources. It is not about prioritizing profit over preservation. It is about upholding the dignity of our families, protecting indigenous stewardship, and ensuring that conservation does not become a tool that pushes our own people out of their own ocean. Supporting our own fishing vessels means we can guarantee that our fishing is done correctly. Imported foreign fish may come from fleets documented to engage in illegal fishing and human rights abuses. That does not strengthen conservation. It weakens it.

Supporting our families who own and operate these vessels supports our very own people, supports our villages, and supports our Fa'aSamoa. We are not asking for unfettered exploitation. We are asking for measured access consistent with science, consistent with federal law, and consistent with our cultural responsibility as stewards.

The Deeds of Cession were intended to protect our sovereignty and our way of life. They were not intended to silence us or to remove our voice from decisions about our own ocean. The path forward must allow us to manage our waters responsibly, with our people fully included.

As the Governor's representative on the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, and as someone who personally stands in firm support of this position, I will vote to remove the commercial fishing prohibition and allow limited access for our local longline and alia vessels seaward of 12 nautical miles around Rose Atoll.

But my commitment does not end with that vote. I will also call on the Council to respect our Fa'aSamoa and to continue to work with us here at home. That means holding community meetings, sitting down with our fishermen, our environmental advocates, and our local resource managers to determine together what responsible management should look like in the future. It means exploring management strategies that reflect both science and culture. It means ensuring that any future decisions about Rose Atoll are shaped not just in Washington or Honolulu, but here in American Samoa.

We are not asking to abandon conservation. We are asserting our right to participate in it.

This is about fairness.

This is about indigenous stewardship.

This is about supporting our families and preserving our Fa'aSamoa.

I make this commitment to the people of American Samoa: I will stand for our right to manage our ocean responsibly, together, and in a way that honors both our culture and our future. And in my firm belief, this is the best path forward for our people.

Respectfully,
Nathan Ilaoa