

# 194th Council Meeting Highlights



CNMI Governor Arnold Palacios joined the first day of the 194th Council meeting in the Mariana Islands.

## March 27–28, 2023, Saipan, CNMI

**The Honorable Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Arnold Palacios** opened the 194th meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council held in March 2023 by communicating his views on President Biden’s direction to the NOAA secretary of commerce to consider designating a national marine sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Island Areas (PRIA).

“It really is about communications, respect for each other, respect for what we represent, and respect for federal and regulatory agencies,” said Palacios. “Government policies have profound impacts on small communities. I am not opposed to conservation and management measures—that is the purpose of the Council. But we need to start talking, respecting and considering the consequences of our decisions.”

Archie Soliai, American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR) director, said all Pacific Island cultures have respect in common. He stated that these federal actions “are done without consultation of our Pacific communities and are very disrespectful. Where is the environmental justice and equity that this administration has prioritized?” He quoted American Samoa Congresswoman Amata who has said this announcement equates to “conservation by confiscation without consultation.”

Council member Will Sword of American Samoa said that further closures of U.S. waters in the Pacific would be “the death knell” of the tuna industry that supports almost a third of the territory’s workforce.

The Council asked NOAA, and all other involved agencies, to consult with the U.S. Pacific Territories beyond the public comment opportunity given in May 2023 on the proposed sanctuary. To better understand the Council’s role and responsibilities in the process, the Council requested the National Ocean Service give a presentation on the proposed sanctuary at its June meeting.

Governor Palacios also expressed apprehension over increas-

ing illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and increased tensions with China in the region. “I continue to support the efforts of the Council to address these concerns, which are efforts to protect the interests of the three U.S. Pacific Territories,” he said.

The Council approved a 3-year Marine Conservation Plan (MCP) for the CNMI, which outlines priorities for fishery infrastructure, capacity, research and development projects. MCPs are developed locally to meet the needs of each territory and approved by the respective Governor and subsequently approved by the Secretary of Commerce.

The Council plans to engage with local leaders and stakeholders from the northern islands of the CNMI on community-based fishing management plans to ensure adequate representation from those communities. The Council also asked NOAA to tailor its equity and environmental justice (EEJ) community engagement plans to each island in the CNMI.

## March 30–31, 2023, Guam

The Honorable Governor of Guam Lou Leon Guerrero opened day three of the Council meeting echoing Governor Palacio’s concern for increasing IUU fishing in the region.

“[IUU] vessels pose a threat not just to our national security, but also to our local fishing industries and up-and-coming industries,” said Leon Guerrero. “Left unchecked, this kind of fishing and associated labor abuses undermine our economic competitiveness, national security, fisheries sustainability, and the livelihoods and human rights of fishers around the world, and will exacerbate the environmental and socioeconomic effects of climate change.”

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*University of Guam Professor Judith Guthertz*

The Governor also spoke to President Biden’s recent announcement about designating a national marine sanctuary in the PRIA, noting it threatens Pacific Islanders’ way of life.

“This is a matter that demands our respect and fluid communication. I don’t believe that any of us are against the intentions, but there are impacts hanging on those intentions. Impacts that fail to consider our food security or our fishing traditions. Pacific Islanders eat two to four times more fish than people in other nations, with most of the fish we eat from our own waters and reefs. We also contribute more than 30% of the global market for tuna.”



Right to left: Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds, Guam Governor Lou Leon Guerrero, Council Chair John Gourley, Council Vice Chair for CNMI Sylvan Igisomar and Council Vice Chair for American Samoa Will Sword at the Council meeting on Guam.

The proposal would have many unintended socioeconomic consequences and conflicts with the President’s Executive Orders promoting EEJ. Fisheries are the leading economic driver for underserved communities in the Pacific. A new sanctuary in the PRIA to help meet the Biden Administration’s “America the Beautiful” 30x30 conservation goal puts a disproportionate burden on U.S. Pacific Islanders, as 53% of U.S. waters in the western Pacific are already closed to fishing through Marine National Monuments.

“When we started hearing about recognition of EEJ issues in our government, I thought it would provide our region with acknowledgement, but in reality it’s only a paper commitment,” said Council member and University of Guam Professor Judith Guthertz. “Our territories have a long history of unfulfilled commitments. We need to feel our efforts are respected and show that our input counts.”

**“I am not opposed to conservation and management measures—that is the purpose of the Council. But we need to start talking, respecting and considering the consequences of our decisions.”**

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Diminished U.S. fisheries would severely decrease U.S. influence in the Pacific. In September 2022, the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee found the proposal to expand the current Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument boundaries lacked supporting data and would provide limited conservation benefits. A 2018 National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) report also said permanent settlements in

the PRIA were unlikely due to the vulnerability of the low-lying areas to storms, lack of freshwater sources and inability to grow crops on the islands.

The Council requested the National Ocean Service meet with the Governors of Guam, the CNMI and American Samoa to describe the sanctuary designation process.

### Territorial Bigeye Tuna Catch Limits

The framework that establishes bigeye tuna longline catch and allocation limits for the territories requires an annually specified catch limit to transfer catch from any territory to U.S. longline vessels based out of Hawai‘i. The Council approved setting an allocation limit of bigeye tuna from each territory to U.S. longline vessels, without setting a catch limit. This allocation limit would be up to 1,500 metric tons per territory, in effect from 2024 to 2026.

Council members emphasized the importance of fishing agreements between the territories and the Hawai‘i-based fleet. These have often been the sole source of funds for fishery development in the MCPs of the territories.

Council member Manny Dueñas of the Guam Fishermen’s Cooperative Association expressed frustration over the low U.S. catch limit and that territories have to rely on these agreements to fund fishery development. “We are Pacific Islanders, just like the people the U.S. government spend hundreds of millions on through the Tuna Treaty, Economic Assistance Agreement, and the Compact of Free Association,” said Dueñas. “Why can’t we get just a fraction of that to support our fisheries?” 🐟