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**Report of the Meeting of the American Samoa Archipelago Fishery Ecosystem Plan
American Samoa Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee**

Friday, June 23, 2023

1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. (SST)

Conference Room, Sadies by the Sea Hotel

Utulei, American Samoa

1. Welcome and Introductions

Will Sword, American Samoa Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC) Chair opened the meeting at 1:07 p.m. REAC members in attendance included: Jessica Ludgate (USDA NRCS); Fatima Sauafea (NMFS PIRO); Scott Burch (National Park Service); Sana Lynch (CRAG); Val Brown (ASNMS); Lonetona Conaway (NOAA OLE); Laupule Tilei (DPW); Tony Langkilde (DOC); Domingo Ochavillo (DMWR); Brian Peck (USFWS); Cpt Richard Quintana (USCG)

2. About the AS Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee

Council Staff presented on the REAC and how it fits into the larger Council process. He said that the Council has been working towards an ecosystem approach to fishery management and taking the time to talk with the community and the local managers is important in that approach. Mitsuyasu gave an overview of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 and explained the Council process.

3. American Samoa Fishery Ecosystem Issues

a. Climate Change and Fisheries

i. Current AS Fishery Stock Status

Council staff reported on the 2022 Annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report. He noted the continued decline in the bottomfish fishery and the number of sets and trips in the pelagic fishery. The report also included fishermen's observations, socioeconomics, and climate indicators.

A member asked why tunas would be bycatch. Council staff responded that the reasons are not included in the report but the REAC members speculated shark depredation or size selection.

Another member asked if the fish were in decline. Council staff responded that the fish doesn't seem to be in decline, just the catch, but that seems to be due to the lack of fishery participation rather than a resource issue.

ii. President Biden's Ocean Climate Action Plan

Council staff noted that President Biden issued the Ocean Climate Action Plan in March 2023. The plan includes actions to make fisheries more resilient to climate change and funding may be available to accomplish this in the future.

The REAC Chair noted that fish stocks are affected by climate change and fishermen have noticed the changes in seasons for certain fish. He also said that rising sea levels will become a problem and coupled with an increase of storms and the surge, it could be worse than it has been historically.

A REAC member noted that in the three years of El Nino, they noticed that more albacore had been landed and they think that climate change and a change in the thermocline is bringing fish up. He said there are some studies on tuna distribution and El Nino is supposed to be good for the fishery.

Another member asked if the Council had done any research into the impacts of temperature increases and looking at existing fish data and at depth, DO, etc. She said the Council should be concerned about an El Nino and the impacts on fishing because other agencies are looking at the impacts of climate on coral reefs but pelagic ecosystems are just as important.

A member said that American Samoa is concerned about low rainfall and drought, and that during El Nino they experience higher wave energy. He noted that an extreme El Nino low tide is really low, which impacts gleaning and thrownet fishing. He agreed with the previous member that there needed to be more studies on the impact of climate change on tunas.

Another noted that there should be somewhere that the various reports on climate change impacts to fisheries is compiled, including ocean acidification and the impact to larval tunas.

b. American Samoa Bottomfish

Council staff reported that NMFS PIFSC completed a new stock assessment and will be presented to the Council at the 195th meeting. The stock assessment used a new stock synthesis model and nine individual stock assessments were developed. The result of the stock assessment showed that the American Samoa bottomfish stock is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing.

A REAC member asked how close the species are to being overfished. DMWR staff responded that those species that appear to be closer to the overfished threshold are shallower bottomfish and less likely to be close to being overfished.

The REAC Chair noted that the former stock assessment was based on faulty data and said this is a better assessment and good news for American Samoa.

4. American Samoa Conservation Issues

a. Sand Mining in American Samoa

Sana Lynch, Coral Reef Advisory Group (CRAG) provided a presentation on sedimentation in American Samoa. They explained the role of the CRAG and talked about sedimentation and the effects it has on coral ecosystems. They also provided a report on reef health and water quality in Aua and said that coral reefs faced higher impact zones closest to the village center. Another study of the effects of sand mining at airport beach showed impacts on coral cover. They said that sediment serves as a vector for coral diseases and the less coral available, the fewer the fish available and suggested that choosing the correct engineering solutions for coastal protection would be beneficial.

The REAC discussed sand mining and areas in American Samoa where sand is removed. There are areas where sand is taken and other areas where waterways are cleared. In some instances the sand is added to fields or taken to homes.

One member said that coastal erosion is prevalent and that we don't think about the ocean when trying to protect the land so we should look at nature-based solutions and evaluate how that would work. Hardening the shoreline will create more wave action and have adverse impacts to the resources. There needs to be an ecosystem approach in viewing this issue.

Another member noted that bioerosion is also important to create sand so those fish stocks need to be kept healthy as well.

b. American Samoa Shark Issues

DMWR reported that fishermen are reporting more shark depredation so the agency is looking at how laws can accommodate the landing of sharks. He said that the Magnuson Stevens Act allows for the landing of sharks whole, while DMWR laws do not allow for the taking sharks. They plan on changing the law to allow the landing of sharks for subsistence and cultural purposes only. The current discussion on these changes include not allowing commercial landings and to not encourage the sale of sharks.

The REAC Chair asked what the timeframe is for this change. DMWR staff said that discussions are taking place with the Attorney General but estimated that it would take a while for the changes to go into effect.

c. Report on Equity and Environmental Justice

Council staff reported that NMFS finalized a national strategic plan for equity and environmental justice (EEJ). The Council is working with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council to develop a plan and workshop for EEJ for the fishery councils. Regionally, NMFS is developing an implementation plan and is planning to meet with the communities. EEJ funding for the region has been provided for the Office of Protected Resources to talk to the community about critical habitat and for NMFS to hold Marine Resource Education Program to train fishing communities in the western Pacific to participate in fisheries management.

A REAC member noted that EEJ was first introduced to American Samoa and the EPA was supportive of the territories.

The REAC Chair said that actions speak louder than words and that the federal government shouldn't use EEJ while forgetting the people impacted by their decisions.

d. Proposed PRIA National Marine Sanctuary

Council staff reported on the proposed Pacific Remote Island (PRI) sanctuary and noted American Samoa had a well-attended public hearing. He said that the Council just received a request for fishing regulations for the proposed sanctuary that morning and the Council will take it on next week at its meeting.

The REAC Chair said that EEJ will not be served if this sanctuary goes through. He asked why the PRI is being treated differently from other sanctuaries. The region already has 65% of the EEZ locked up to commercial fishing and American Samoa's economy is 80% dependent on commercial fishing. He said that the US purse seine fishery provides 85% of the fish to the cannery in American Samoa. It is unfair to them and he called it an Economic Extinction Level Event.

A REAC member said that enforcing the PRI sanctuary laws would be nearly impossible. It will take a lot of money and time to patrol that area and NOAA doesn't have the manpower to do those patrols. She said that resources to patrol even within the EEZ of American Samoa are not adequate. It is an injustice to be mandated to do what the sanctuary wants to do without being given the resources. She said that the countries that don't listen to the rules are the ones that will fish in those areas and those countries that do listen will because they want to keep their permits and licenses. There have already been incursions into the PRI and it will only get worse without the US fishing boats in the area to report them.

Another member said that the local fishing fleet won't have the ability to fish and they are the most regulated fleet in the world. She said it is late in the process to get the community to rally behind it but they need to educate the community on how it impacts them on the industries that will be impacted. If you educate the local fishers that it will affect them too not just the big boats, there will be more support.

e. Update on Fishery Development
i. Status of Super-Alia

Tony Langkilde, Super Alia project manager for DOC, presented on the status of the development of a large Alia vessel to be used for fishery development in American Samoa. He noted that when the Council closed areas to large vessels, they noted that Alia don't fish far due to safety. A project was then initiated to allow for alia fishermen to fish further from shore and be safe. The design was supported by Department of Interior Affairs and the Economic Development Administration liked the idea of creating new jobs and building capacity and funded four vessels. The first vessel will arrive in American Samoa in August and be used as a training platform for the people of American Samoa to learn how to fish. The vessel will be equipped with a trailer, a flake-ice machine, and a longline reel. A master fisherman is being solicited to help DOC/DMWR develop the training program which includes handling and marketing the fish as well as preparing and maintaining the vessel.

A REAC member asked how the program will be implemented. Langkilde responded that newspaper ads will be used to recruit participants and a manual and syllabus will be used for the training.

Another member asked if the vessel will be able to fish outside of the EEZ. Langkilde said that the vessel can go 500 miles; so yes, it could go outside of the EEZ and fish.

A member asked how long the crew and captain would be subsidized for and if commercial fishing would be allowed. Langkilde said that funding is available for two years for the crew and that they will be able to sell the fish that they catch.

Another member asked when the next boats will arrive and where are they planning to be moored. Langkilde said the next boat will arrive in six months and every six months after. They are working with DMWR to determine where the vessels will be moored.

i.ii. Sustainable Fisheries Projects

Council Staff reported on the Sustainable Fisheries Fund projects and noted that the funds come from American Samoa's sharing of tuna quota with US fisheries. The funds are spent on projects in American Samoa's Marine Conservation Plans. Right now there are four agreements which supports capacity building through scholarships for students with the expectation of them returning to work in the territorial agencies; a fuel subsidy program for the AS longline fleet; the installment of an ice machine at DMWR and the reinforcing of the fuel dock; education and outreach projects such as a kids fishing tournament in Manu'a; and alia vessel improvements.

The REAC Chair asked if there are more funds that will be made available in the future. Council staff responded that funds for last year's agreement are going to be made available at \$390,000 and DMWR is committing funds for the scholarship program and repairing boat ramps.

A REAC member asked about the timeframe for the new projects. Council staff responded that funds would be made available in October and projects would take two to three years to complete.

5. Public Comment

Manuel P. Duenas from Guam said he listened to the concerns and issues and appreciated the REAC being passionate yet understanding. He was excited about the super alia project and capacity building. He said people don't intentionally look for sharks and it is something that you find at the end of the hook. The law being discussed should allow for the sale of sharks to recover the costs and loss of gear. He cautioned American Samoa wanting an increase in enforcement resources because he said that there would be more boarding of fishing vessels due to boredom.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

The American Samoa Regional Ecosystem Advisory Committee (REAC) made the following recommendations.

Regarding Climate Change, the AS REAC:

- Recommended the Council compile information on tuna and preferences for oceanographic conditions and how they might shift with ENSO and climate change and provide more information to fishermen on where the fish will shift from or to in the region.

Regarding American Samoa, the AS REAC:

- Recommended the Council request DMWR and DOC work together to develop fisheries capacity in American Samoa.
- Recommends the Council provide the REAC members with information on the engine repair training program and SPC training opportunities and include those types of programs into the next MCP in order for American Samoa to take advantage of those opportunities.

- Recommends the Council look at including training for larger vessel captains to build capacity for local fishermen to stay and make more money, make it easier for US nationals to get licenses, and for the longline fishery to hire and keep captains.
- Recommends the Council and DMWR work with the National Park Service to determine how it can support the wave buoy program.

7. Other Business

Council staff noted that the 195th Council meeting would occur at the Rex Lee Auditorium in the next week and invited the REAC members to participate in the meeting and at the associated Fishers Forum.

National Park Service said that they will have a booth at the Fishers Forum focused on an initiative to build awareness for ocean safety. They are partnering with PacIOOS to provided data to help fishermen and coastal users to make informed decisions on where and when to go. Buoys are being deployed that will provide data on wave heights and other data around Aunu'u and Manu'a. There is also a program to train the community to help support and maintain the buoys. The National Park Service is looking for additional partners to help raise awareness.

The meeting ended at 3:37 p.m.