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## **Report of the American Samoa Standing Committee Meeting**

Thursday, June 22, 2023

*Sadie's By the Sea Conference Room, Utulei, American Samoa*

*10:00 a.m. – 12 Noon*

### **1. Welcome and Introductions**

Will Sword, American Samoa Standing Committee (ASSC) Chair, welcomed everyone and opened the meeting at 10:15 a.m. ASSC members in attendance included Brian Peck (USFWS) and Domingo Ochavillo (designee for Archie Soliai, DMWR) as well as the Council's Executive Director Kitty Simonds.

Others in attendance included Zach Yamada, Mark Fitchett, and Joshua DeMello (Council Staff); Matt Ramsey, David Sakoda, John Gourley, Sylvan Igisomar, and Manny Duenas (Council Members); and Alphina Liusamoa (DMWR)

### **2. Draft 2022 American Samoa Annual SAFE Report Module**

Council staff reported that the 2022 annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report has been drafted and will be presented at the Council meeting. There has been a continued low catch for bottomfish, mainly driven by shore-based landings for shallow species. The catch was below the Annual Catch Limit specified in the rebuilding plan. Trips declined nearly 90% and gear hours declined 95% from the historical average. Longline sets also decreased from last year and troll trips declined by over 50% from 2021. However, there was an uptick in catch for albacore, mahimahi and marlin with an increase in CPUE for albacore. Fisher observations noted that earthquakes may have pushed up deepwater fish and sharks and they noted that the water temperature was warmer and the winds made it difficult to fish deep.

Ochavillo said there has been no alia longline operating for the last few years but albacore catch has been increasing since 2020.

Sword said that there are a lot of sharks out there, especially at the FADs, with an increase in depredation at the FADs.

### **3. American Samoa Bottomfish**

#### **a. Stock Assessment WPSAR Report**

Council staff reported that a Western Pacific Stock Assessment Review (WPSAR) was conducted on the American Samoa bottomfish stock assessment. The WPSAR Terms of Reference was satisfied and the stock assessment was accepted by the panel. The stock

assessment was broken down into 11 species and developed individual stock assessments for nine species. He noted that this may be used as

Simonds asked what NMFS did to make this stock assessment different. Council staff said that preceding the stock assessment, there were data workshops that were held that allowed PIFSC to talk to fishermen and understand where there shifts in the fishery through time. The assessment scientists noted that the fishery participation declined since the 1980s. There was also an increase in life history information and the WPSAR panel noted the importance of life history information. Simonds said the Magnuson Act is about working with the people and this is a lesson for PIFSC for future assessments.

#### **b. American Samoa Bottomfish Benchmark Stock Assessment**

Council staff reported that NMFS PIFSC completed a new stock assessment and will be presented to the Council at the 195<sup>th</sup> 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 member asked if the new stock assessment include no-take MPAs as an effect on the population. Council staff said NMFS looked at the data trends and time series to explain why fishing decreased but not specifically about closures. That can be something that is included

#### **c. Management Unit Species Revision**

Council staff reported that the Council will be reviewing options for revising the management unit species (MUS) list for American Samoa bottomfish. The current list does not reflect the fishery and will be revised to include new species and move other species to the ecosystem component species list. This action is running in parallel to the new stock assessment so the proposed new list will be used for assessing the stock in the next stock assessment in 2027.

### **4. 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.

Simonds said that NMFS is working internally to train themselves on EEJ prior to expending funds on external issues. The staff is developing its next five-year program plan and will be

incorporating EEJ and climate change. Inflation Reduction Act funding will be provided that may be used for this as well. Council members should be prepared to talk about all the EEJ issues in the island areas.

#### **5. American Samoa Sea Turtles**

Alphina Liusamoa, DMWR staff and sea turtle program coordinator reported that DMWR monitors green and hawksbill sea turtles. DMWR has a stranding program to respond to calls of stranded/dead turtles where the turtle's weight and length are taken and samples are taken and/or tagged. Necropsies are performed on dead turtles to determine why it died. One turtle died from eating mangrove, which is an unusual food. The program also visits confirmed nesting sites, some of which were washed away by the king tides. DMWR doesn't have permits to handle live turtles, only for nesting work. They work with NMFS PIFSC for handling live turtles. DMWR plans on doing additional research in Manu'a and Rose Atoll because Tutuila mainly has hawksbill turtles and rarely get green turtles; Rose Atoll mostly has green sea turtles; and Manu'a gets both green and hawksbill, mostly at Ofu.

Simonds asked if there have been increases in the different species in the past 10 years. Peck said that Rose Atoll green turtles are highly variable because their feeding grounds are in Fiji so the number of nesters can vary quite a bit.

Sword asked about Swains Island. DMWR said that they have not done that island yet and planned to attach turtle research to the rat eradication project planned for Swains.

A member asked if sea turtle assessments have been done by surrounding countries. DMWR said that she was unsure about other assessments but tagged turtles

#### **6. National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa and Proposed PRI 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 expects to receive a request for fishing regulations for the proposed sanctuary prior to the Council meeting.

Simonds said the review process for sanctuaries supposed to be every five years and the territory is available to review its Memorandum of Agreement with NOAA at any time. Ochavillo said a sanctuary condition report was done a few years ago but did not know if a review of the sanctuary management plan was done.

Peck asked if the ONMS package will include all of the PRI or differentiate between the areas that include or not include the current monument. Staff said he expects it to be for the extent of the EEZ as directed by the president in the White House memo.

## **7. Report on Rose Atoll Marine National Monument**

Peck reported that a longline vessel that was grounded at Rose Atoll in 1993 is still impacting the atoll and causing cyanobacteria blooms. USFWS is trying to remove all of the remaining wreckage to reduce the iron pollution. He said that USFWS monitors the peak for sea turtle nesting from November to December, seabird nesting colonies, and coral bleaching at Rose Atoll. He noted that the Comprehensive Conservation Plan developed in conjunction with the National Wildlife Refuge. The discussion with NMFS on the management plan has primarily been looking at gaps and mandates.

## **8. Advisory Group Reports and Recommendations**

Council staff provided the recommendations from the Archipelagic Plan Team, Social Science Planning and Research Committee, and Scientific and Statistical Committee.

### ***Regarding the territorial BMUS revision,***

- ▶ The APT recommends the Council select Alternative 2 to revise the American Samoa BMUS list in the American Samoa FEP based on the results of the hierarchical cluster analysis by PIFSC, a review of the ten non-exhaustive factors for determining which species require federal conservation and management as specified in National Standard 1, and the life history synthesis, as well as the five related Magnuson-Stevens Act management components (i.e., SDC, ACLs/AMs, EFH, monitoring and bycatch, and fishing communities) based on the generation of MSA component reports developed by the APT. The APT agreed to move forward with territorial BMUS revisions in alignment with the current schedule stock assessments for each island area such that the list revisions will occur separately for each jurisdiction.
- ▶ The SSPC endorses the fishing communities' component report for the Territory Bottomfish Management Unit Species Revision amendment, as it provides an adequate representation of the existing information. The report captures the potential impacts appropriately in terms of other information.
- ▶ SSC recommends that the Council support Option 2 and move forward with final action on the American Samoa BMUS Amendment process.

### ***Regarding the American Samoa BMUS WPSAR Report***

- ▶ **SSC accepts the results of the WPSAR review** and supports the panel's conclusions and recommendations.

### ***Regarding the American Samoa BMUS Benchmark Stock Assessment Report***

- ▶ SSC recommends that global rather than local based sensitivity analyses become a routine component of stock assessment workflows to better support confidence in model-based inference for management decision-making.

- ▶ **SSC accepts the 2023 benchmark assessment as BSIA.** SSC recommends that the Council direct staff to convene the P\* and SEEM working groups to quantify the uncertainties to set the Acceptable Biological Catch and specify the Annual Catch Limits for the American Samoa BMUS.

## **9. Other Business**

Simonds inquired about the Governor of American Samoa's intent to sue NMFS over ELAPS. She said that PIRO wanted to do something in the WCPFC prior to domestic regulations. Sword said the Governor did not get an adequate response. He will ask the question at the Council meeting on the status of the Governor's letter to NMFS.

## **10. Public Comment**

Manny Duenas provided a comment on the inequity for Pacific Islanders and stressed the need for funding for the community to do the research and monitoring on green sea turtles and other issues. He said that the federal government needs to be held accountable for their actions that impact American Samoa.

John Gourley was concerned with critical habitat designation for green sea turtles and the impacts that the designation will have on research projects and federal funding.

## **11. Discussion and Recommendations**

The American Samoa Standing Committee made the following recommendations:

### ***Regarding the BMUS revision:***

- The American Samoa Standing Committee recommends the Council select Alternative 2, to revise the existing BMUS list for the American Samoa FEP.

### ***Regarding the benchmark stock assessment:***

- The American Samoa Standing Committee recommends the Council direct staff to utilize the new stock assessment to begin the process for developing a new ACL for American Samoa Bottomfish.

### ***Regarding American Samoa issues:***

- The American Samoa Standing Committee recommends the Council assist American Samoa in supporting commercial fishing.
- The American Samoa Standing Committee recommends the Council follow-up with responses to the Governor on letters sent to ONMS (PRI Sanctuary) and NMFS (ELAPS)

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 a.m.