



The Governor and other Samoan officials, WPRFMC members and family attended an 'ava ceremony at the Tufele Cultural Center in Utulei, AS prior to the opening of the Council meeting.

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## Council and American Samoa Leaders Frustrated by Continued Fishery Management Through Sanctuaries and Monuments in the Pacific



### American Samoa Governor Stresses Importance of Fisheries and Respect to the U.S. Territory

**“You must be mindful of the decisions you make...so that the interests of small fishing communities are not disregarded”** was the main message heard in the remarks of the Honorable Gov. Lemanu Peleti Mauga, who opened the 195th meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council in Pago Pago, American Samoa.

“The ocean and its marine resources have sustained our Fa’asamoa for thousands of years. These abundant natural resources have provided food on our table and supported our people, especially during calamities,” noted the Governor. “Our community went back to farming and fishing when we closed our borders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ocean is what has sustained us and will continue to do so for years to come.”

*“Respect is a very important aspect to the Pacific people, and I call on our federal partners to show some respect – sit down with us, talk with us and not to us.”*

However, he stressed the pressure that global climate change is putting on the islands, despite the territory’s small carbon footprint. “Our high vulnerability could lead to widespread food and water insecurity, increased health risks, lack of access to social services and even forced displacements in some cases,” said Governor Mauga. “Due to climate change, the ocean that has sustained us for millennia is now threatening our daily lives. We require



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StarKist Samoa cannery representatives attended the WPRFMC meeting June 28, 2023, to express their opposition to the proposed sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Islands.

**STORY ICON KEY**

REGIONAL INTEREST



CONSERVATION



FISHERMEN



EDUCATORS



GOVERNMENT



Federal



Hawai'i



Guam/  
CNMI



American  
Samoa

*Dedicated to ecosystem-based fisheries management in the U.S. Pacific Islands.*



more support and coordination for increased access to climate adaptation strategies, mitigation data and knowledge.”

He also noted that, in addition to climate change, government actions threaten the tuna industry that sustains the local economy, referencing the proposed national marine sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Island Areas (PRIA) and the Effort Limit Areas for Purse Seine (ELAPS). He said a National Marine Fisheries Service report showed the percentage of retained catch for the local purse seiner fleet in the PRIA was as much as 25% historically, with fishing effort increasing over the past few years.

“Most, if not all, of the fish caught in these waters is landed in the territory,” said Governor Mauga. “The misinformation that has been circulated by the proponents of this sanctuary is insulting and misconstrues the reality of the importance of these waters to our territory.”

The purse seine fleet is critical for the continued viability of the tuna industry, as it provides approximately 75% of the tuna needed for the StarKist Samoa cannery production.

The Governor emphasized what saddened him the most about the federal actions is that they have been done without meaningful consultation and engagement of the American Samoa people. “There is no equity and justice served

when the people that these federal actions will impact have no say, and no voice,” he said. “Respect is a very important aspect to the Pacific people, and I call on our federal partners to show some respect – sit down with us, talk with us and not to us.”

“And the question is, will the Administration and NOAA seriously consider these comments in the context of its own priorities supporting Equity and Environmental Justice in underserved and underrepresented communities?” said Council Chair John Gourley.

“It’s going to be a long battle and we need to be ready,” added Council Vice Chair for American Samoa Will Sword. “This top-down approach is typical of Government overreach and flies in the face of democracy, government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

**Council Challenged by NOAA Prohibition on Commercial Fishing for Proposed Pacific Remote Islands Sanctuary**

Congresswoman Amata Radewagen from American Samoa expressed her deep concern regarding the lack of consultation with the U.S. territories affected by the NOAA proposed sanctuary in the PRIA. In a video message during the Council meeting, Congresswoman

*“The misinformation that has been circulated by the proponents of this sanctuary is insulting and misconstrues the reality of the importance of these waters to our territory.”*

Radewagen stated her astonishment at the Administration’s failure to meaningfully consult and engage with the U.S. Pacific territories. She criticized the sudden announcement of this potentially drastic change via a tweet by the President.

Despite the authority granted by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Congresswoman highlighted the Council’s lack of involvement in the decision-making process. She emphasized that the Administration was pursuing the wrong policy and employing an inappropriate approach.

On June 23, the Council received the official sanctuary proposal, which requested the Council’s assistance in formulating fishing regulations. Currently, commercial fishing is permitted between 50-200 miles in parts of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (PRIMNM). However, NOAA’s first objective aims to extend the existing protections of the Monument to the entire U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ), thereby prohibiting commercial fishing by U.S. fishermen in U.S. waters.

Council members expressed their opposition to the proposed prohibition on commercial fishing. For more than 30 years, American Samoa-based purse seiners and Honolulu-based longliners operated in the waters of the Pacific Remote Islands Area until the establishment of the PRIMNM in 2006. This new action will force U.S. purse seiners to fish farther away from Pago Pago Harbor and transport their catch to Mexico and Ecuador instead of the StarKist Samoa cannery, which serves as the backbone of American Samoa’s economy.

Archie Soliai, Director of the American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources, stated that this federal action, coupled with NOAA’s

rule requiring 558 purse seine days to be fished within the U.S. EEZ, is “the nail in the coffin” to the tuna industry in American Samoa. The Governor of American Samoa has expressed objection to the proposed rule and has notified NOAA of its intention to file a lawsuit.

Dr. Judi Guthertz, Guam Council member, strongly criticized the federal government for proposing the sanctuary despite the opposition from the people of American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI. “Shame on the federal government” admonished Guthertz as she urged the process to restart with consultation and consensus building, highlighting the vigilant attention being paid to the situation by the islands’ fishermen, senators and leaders.

Council Member Sword expressed concern for the livelihoods of those working in the canneries, who rely on fishing to support their families. “Those cannery workers are poor and you want to take food off of their tables,” said Sword. He questioned the decision-making process, pointing out that advice is being taken from individuals who do not reside in American Samoa and will not be adversely affected by the proposed action.

Guam Council Vice Chair Manny Dueñas suggested the allocation of percentages for commercial, noncommercial and

indigenous fishing, rather than a complete prohibition on fishing. Dueñas also raised questions about the true consideration of conserving resources asking, “Which generation is being prioritized, and is it for the people of the mainland or the Pacific?”

Kitty Simonds, Council Executive Director, criticized the contradiction between claiming to preserve cultural influences, while simultaneously abolishing fishing, which holds significant importance within the culture. “It’s obvious that the ocean belongs only to the federal government and not to its people, and we are merely spectators,” said Simonds.

The Council has until December 23 to respond to NOAA’s proposal. The NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is expected to complete the process, including the Environmental Impact Statement, by August 2024, with implementation scheduled to occur before the upcoming elections.

The Council sent a comment letter to ONMS June 2, 2023, describing its objections to the proposed sanctuary: <https://tinyurl.com/ONMSCommentLetter>.

The meeting agenda and summary of action items are available at [www.wpcouncil.org/event/195th-council-meeting](http://www.wpcouncil.org/event/195th-council-meeting). 🐟

