



**Final Report of the American Samoa Archipelago Advisory Panel Meeting
Tuesday, June 4, 2024, 5 p.m. – 7 p.m. (SST)**

1. Welcome and Introductions

Nathan Ilaoa, American Samoa (AS) Advisory Panel (AP) Vice Chair, opened the meeting at 5:15 p.m. Members in attendance included Nonu Tuisamoa, Joe Hamby, Dustin Snow, Gene Pan, Edgar Feliciano, and Jerome Ierome.

Others in attendance included Zach Yamada, Joshua DeMello, Mark Fitchett, Felix Penalosa (Council Staff), Angela Delacruz (Council Staff), Adam Ayers (PIFSC), Timothy Costelloe (Paragon International University), and Domingo Ochavillo (Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources [DMWR]).

2. Review of the Last AP Recommendations and Meeting

Felix Penalosa, Council staff, provided a review of the last Joint Advisory Committee meeting held on May 19, 2024.

3. Feedback from the Fleet

AP members provided their fisher observations from January to June 2024.

A member noted that fish supply has been steady, but foreign vessels are undercutting local fishermen, creating significant issues. The vice chair said there were issues of non-US flag vessels giving away fish and bypassing customs, which undercuts the local fleet. There was video evidence of these incidents and the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) has been contacted for clarification. NOAA OLE indicated that local enforcement, such as the American Samoa Government (ASG) Treasury Customs (Customs). He suggested that it may be helpful to invite someone from the US Coast Guard and the Attorney General's office to one of the AP's informal meetings for further discussion.

A member stated that the bycatch issue involves masimasi and marlin not being sold to canneries, with the standard price at \$2.50 per pound. However, Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese boats are selling bycatch at \$1.50 per pound, which is enticing but problematic. He prefers to purchase sustainably caught or AS/US-caught fish at the standard price of \$2.50, as it was the right thing to do. About four of the longline vessels that he purchased from are struggling with this, and local captains are selling what they can. There is a need to develop rules and regulations to address this issue.

The AP said the US lacks effective programs to manage or control imports of illegally caught or unregulated fish or fish associated with human trafficking issues. Industry leaders expressed complaints, leading to the realization that NOAA lacks the necessary tools or authorization to manage these issues effectively. Consequently, the discussion should involve other US agencies,

such as the Trade Representative (for establishing tariffs, duties, import restrictions, and rules of origin) and the US International Trade Commission. A meeting with these agencies is planned for June to discuss measures to eliminate unfair competition and protect jobs. The AP discussed wages not being adjusted to the realities of the real world. With prices rising by 30%, this has a significant impact on everything.

In November, a sportfishing boat will arrive, bringing sport and spear fishermen for three-month periods. The sport fishing boat Harley Rose aims to boost tourism by attracting high-end spear fishermen targeting dogtooth tuna, positioning AS as a tourist destination. Additionally, sport fishermen have expressed interest in a system for live bait supply and are inquiring about available options.

Another member said he has been trying to find octopus and was overcharged from roadside vendors. Some local sellers ripped him off by charging \$40 for a small, elbow-length grouper. He said he would rather fish for himself and advised the AP to stay away from overpriced octopus sellers in Leloalua.

An AP member reported that most purse seine vessels have moved to the east side of French Polynesia due to changing seasonal conditions. Some boats are now fishing east and unloading in South America, but this has not impacted StarKist, which continues to increase its production. StarKist's fish supply has remained stable despite shifts in fishing areas.

Another member continues to face long-standing challenges, primarily due to the low price of albacore, which necessitates crucial cuts. One major issue is the shortage of captain masters for vessels. Another critical issue is the bait supply, with only two main suppliers: KS and StarKist. StarKist is ceasing bait supply to those who have not been long-term buyers, and KS only supplies their own vessels. StarKist's bait takes up freezer space, delaying the unloading of purse seine catches. Additionally, StarKist has been selling bait that is nearly unusable, further straining longliners already struggling with prices and costs.

Regarding American Samoa Fisheries Issues, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council address the disproportionate burden faced on the US fishery and consumers and provide a subsidy program to promote fresh locally caught fish.

4. Council Fisheries Issues

A. 2023 Annual SAFE Report – American Samoa

Zach Yamada, Council staff, presented the 2023 fishery highlights from the archipelagic and pelagic report for American Samoa.

There was an increase in total BMUS catch to 4,689 lb in the American Samoa bottomfish fishery, remaining below the rebuilding ACL and likely associated with a notable increase in effort. CPUE slightly decreased because effort increased to a greater extent than catch. Creel survey data indicated that the humpback snapper was the most harvested ecosystem component species, while the blue-banded surgeonfish had the most landings from commercial purchase data. New in the 2023 SAFE reports is a non-commercial archipelagic fishery performance

module for American Samoa that estimates contributions from non-commercial fishers based on corrections to existing creel survey and commercial data streams. American Samoa longline fisheries saw a continued decline in effort, while the pelagic troll fishery experienced a rebound on fishing trips. There was a decrease in catch for longliners driven by fewer landings of albacore

and skipjack tuna, though troll landings in 2023 were relatively consistent with 2022. Bycatch pelagic fisheries were slightly increased in 2023 due to discards of tuna species. National Coral Reef Monitoring Program surveys around American Samoa showed increased bottom coral coverage and slightly higher fish biomass. Socioeconomic data indicated stable fuel prices but declining revenue, and protected species reviews showed few recent interactions with protected species. Oceanic and climate indicators showed slight changes, with a shift from La Niña to El Niño and increased sea surface temperatures, suggesting potential coral bleaching due to high water temperatures in 2023.

A member asked if the data on oceanic and climate indicators included data from the American Samoa Tula station. If not, then the next American Samoa Annual SAFE Report should consider including data from the Tula station.

Regarding depredation, the AP discussed that there was a possibility in correlation with sharks and climate change.

The AP was concerned about the amount of tuna bycatch that was thrown back into the water from the longline fleet. As fishermen, they understand if the fish released were the lower priority since yellowfin does not hold as much value compared to albacore since the canneries do not accept yellowfin.

Another member raised concerns about whether released fish are dead or alive, and that it was being wasted, especially considering the demand for fish within the local community. He also mentioned the 30x30 initiative and the importance of assessing CO2 levels in American Samoa compared to other countries.

Regarding the American Samoa Annual SAFE Report, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council consider using data from TULA Station to track the atmospheric carbon dioxide around American Samoa

B. Status of PRIA Sanctuary Proposal

Joshua DeMello, Council staff, provided an update on the state of the proposed Pacific Remote Island Areas sanctuary. The Pacific Remote Islands is currently undergoing the designation process for a National Marine Sanctuary. The area was nominated by the Pacific Remote Islands Coalition and President Biden issued a Presidential Memorandum (March 24, 2023) directing the Secretary of Commerce to consider initiating the designation process. A Notice of Intent to conduct scoping in preparation to draft an EIS was issued on April 17, 2023 with scoping meetings held in Hawaii, CNMI, Guam, American Samoa, and online. A separate workshop was held in American Samoa in September 2023 to gather additional information on impacts to American Samoa. Since then, there has been no known movement on the proposed sanctuary, although NOAA has been working to provide briefings to the White House on this issue. Draft documents were expected for public comment in spring 2024 but that has yet to occur.

A member asked about the timelines and implications of the PRIA Sanctuary Proposal compared to the NWHI Sanctuary Proposal. Council staff explained that the PRIA proposal may not undergo a sanctuary process and may proceed depending on the election outcome, potentially in December. The NWHI proposal published the EIS, with a 60-day public comment period, expected to conclude before November and the final decision possibly in the Fall of 2024. ONMS may take three months to respond to public comments with anticipated final EIS by 2025.

An AP member expressed concern about the impact of comments from individuals not connected to the Pacific Ocean on the decision-making process, while another expressed no interest in the proposal, particularly due to tuna's migratory nature. There was a consensus among the members that the process was highly political, with one member hoping that the winning candidate would recognize the importance of fishing access to American Samoa.

The AP said there was a need for monitoring and policing fishing areas. Several members underscored the canneries' importance to American Samoa's economy, predicting severe consequences if they were to close. Additionally, there was a call for the local government to explore alternative revenue sources and criticism of the federal government's dismissal of the importance of tuna to the economy, emphasizing the need to support the fishing industry through new strategies.

C. US Stakeholder Engagement on North Pacific Striped Marlin Rebuilding Plan

Mark Fitchett, Council staff, provided a review of the US stakeholder engagement on the North Pacific Striped Marlin and the development of options for the Rebuilding Plan. On April 8, 2024, several stakeholders emphasized the importance of scenarios that account for unreported discards and disparities in bycatch reporting among WCPFC members. Concerns were raised regarding the effectiveness of managing the stock solely through a total allowable catch level, with calls for consideration of complementary measures such as circle hooks, size limits, and modifications to longline gear. Additionally, participants highlighted the need for greater equity in catch reporting, monitoring, and observer coverage across member states. The outreach also addressed science-focused concerns, including uncertainties in stock boundaries, stock mixing, and variations in life history characteristics. Participants noted observations of mixing between WCNPO and other Pacific stocks and questioned the adequacy of current stock boundaries. The stock status of the North Pacific striped marlin may change with a new memo from PIFSC to PIRO indicating that the stock status determination criteria under the Pelagic FEP render the stock not overfished.

A member asked about the split in participants in the meetings between NGOs and industry folks and questioned whether they leaned more towards environmental concerns or was balanced.

Council staff said the group was balanced, with a stronger presence from more concerned parties. One of the members emphasized the need for enforceable measures and improved reporting to address concerns about non-targeted species. NGOs were concerned about the lack of reporting on discards and unknown landings despite the importance of these species to the US industry.

Another member added that the practice within the longline and purse seine industry, where marlin, a non-target species, is caught, typically goes to the crew or is distributed to families and friends.

5. American Samoa Marine Conservation Plan 2024-2027

Domingo Ochavillo provided an overview of the revised American Samoa Marine Conservation Plan (MCP). The MCP is set to expire in July 2024 and serves as the document allocating funds from big-eye tuna quota transfers to address priority issues in American Samoa. While priorities at DMWR remain unchanged, the Director has identified several new areas of focus, including the importance of establishing a Registry for Fishermen to aid in disaster response efforts such as during the Covid pandemic. Recreational fishing and combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing were highlighted. Federal regulations, including potential closures of fishing grounds, pose additional threats. Seabed mining is recognized as a threat, and declining catch rates of American Samoa Longline (ASLL) due to Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFN) are being addressed through discussions with the South Pacific group on managing South Pacific albacore. The main objective of the MCP remains to maximize social and economic benefits from fisheries, with a focus on developing projects in Manu'a, mariculture, capacity training, and fishermen lending programs. The plan also aims to develop a clear tuna policy to address challenges in the sector, with recent funding secured for this purpose. Education and outreach, including scholarships for local students, are emphasized as important components of the MCP.

A member asked for details on its potential implications and whether it might conflict with federal decisions.

Ochavillo stressed the importance of developing the tuna policy to demonstrate unity in statements and help gain additional support for local fisheries. The local perspective is needed to understand threats to American Samoa's fisheries, including purse seine and longline fishing and the operation of canneries.

A member expressed concern about the potential for litigation, such as in the case of the Large Vessel Prohibited Area (LVPA), and asked if DMWR plans to make fishing licensing and reporting mandatory. Ochavillo said that discussions are ongoing regarding the revision of local fishing regulations, with a focus on enhancing the tracking of fishing effort and catch, particularly for bottomfish.

A member emphasized the importance of the AP's involvement in policy and rule-making processes, particularly concerning the tuna policy. The AP was willing to assist DMWR in their efforts. The member mentioned the late Brian Thompson's association with the AP and suggested MCP continue to support projects in Manu'a islands based on community feedback.

Another member asked about the MCP Coordinator position. Ochavillo said that it has been advertised and is undergoing the ASG hiring process. Funding is available for this year and possibly the next two years.

Another member noted the importance of prioritizing infrastructure development and suggested focusing on community aquaculture projects to prepare for the cannery's potential closure.

The members highlighted the need to establish American Samoa's identity within the fishing fleet to support the local economy and implement policies to support DMWR's initiatives, particularly in certifying licensed boats for fishing. One of the members provided an update that the Fono passed the bill to ensure the local American Samoa tuna purse seine fishery is recognized with special privileges entitled to Small Island Developing States under the WCPFC.

6. Other Business

There was no other business discussed.

7. Public Comment

Tim Costelloe, a PhD candidate from Paragon International University, is studying the asymmetric power relations between larger countries and smaller island states. American Samoa's unique position, not being recognized as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), places it under the control of larger powers. He noted that he is about to publish three articles, focusing on the situation with the PRIA and its effects on American Samoa. He is particularly interested in the implications of PRIA closures pushing fishing activities into high seas beyond national jurisdiction. Additionally, Tim is examining broader power dynamics between smaller and larger countries, considering AS's functioning as a SIDS despite not being formally recognized as one. He has developed a survey aimed at gathering feedback from stakeholders, particularly from the fishing industry in AS, on how PRIA closures will impact them. He is researching to understand the best way for the US government to uphold its environmental commitments without disproportionately burdening AS and how to address the concerns of ASG and the fishing industry in AS. While some questions may be controversial, he emphasizes that he is focused on data collection and understanding AS people's perspectives on these issues. He acknowledged American Samoa's proactive efforts to advocate for its needs despite facing threats from the federal government.

8. Discussion and Recommendations

Regarding American Samoa Fisheries Issues, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council address the disproportionate burden faced by the US fishery and consumers and provide a subsidy program to promote fresh locally caught fish.

Regarding the American Samoa Annual SAFE Report, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council consider using data from TULA Station to track the atmospheric carbon dioxide around American Samoa.

Regarding the American Samoa MCP, the American Samoa AP recommends the Council endorse the MCP for 2024-2026.

Regarding the American Samoa MCP's American Samoa Tuna Policy project, the AS AP recommends the Council request DMWR include the AP in the development of this policy.

Meeting ended 7:40 pm