WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Report of the Joint Intersessional Archipelagic & Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan Team Meeting

January 21-23, 2025
12:00 noon – 5:00 p.m. (Hawaii)
11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (American Samoa)
8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. + 1 day (Guam and CNMI)

1. Welcome and Introductions

Emily Crigler, Pelagic Fishery Ecosystem Plan Team (Plan Team) Chair, opened the meeting, reviewed meeting protocols, and invited Plan Team members to introduce themselves. Members in attendance from the Archipelagic Plan Team included Brent Tibbatts, Bryan Ishida, Danika Kleiber, David O'Brien, Domingo Ochavillo, Eva Schemmel, Eric Cruz, Frank Parrish, Frank Villagomez, Irene Kelly, Jason Helyer, Jenny Suter, Jude Lizama, Kisei Tanaka, Marc Nadon, Minling Pan, Rhane Malae, Rob Ahrens, and Sean Hanser. Absent from the Archipelagic Plan Team were Felipe Carvalho, Tye Kindinger, and Tom Oliver.

Members in attendance from the Archipelagic Plan Team included Ashley Tomita Brad Gough, Bryan Ishida, Jason Helyer, Jenny Suter, Kirsten Leong, Lynn Rassel, Minling Pan, Nathan Van Ee, Rob Ahrens, and Phoebe Woodworth-Jefcoats. Absent from the Pelagic Plan Team were Michelle Sculley, Michael Kinney, Jenny Stahl, Chelsey Young, Melissa Snover, Jason Phillibotte, Frank Roberto, Sean Felise, Reka Domokos, and Felipe Carvalho.

Marlowe Sabater, Archipelagic Plan Team Chair, reviewed the agenda for the three-day meeting before leading participants through the agenda items scheduled for Day 1.

2. Report on 2024 Plan Team Recommendations and Work Item

Thomas Remington, Council contractor, prefaced this agenda item with background information. Many of the presentations are directly related to recommendations and work items stemming from the Plan Team meetings in May 2024 and associated working group progress since then. Each of the subitems represent a separate effort by a Plan Team working group.

A. Fishery Performance Work Items

i. American Samoa

a. Creel Survey Data Evaluation

Remington presented that the 2023 shore-based creel survey data from American Samoa showed a notable increase in total estimated catch for Bottomfish Management Unit Species (BMUS). This marks a trend of increase following a nearly nonexistent catch level in 2015-2016. The increase can be attributed to advancements in survey protocols, particularly in fish identification, which may have influenced the results. The surge in BMUS catch in 2023 was driven primarily by *Lutjanus kasmira* and was largely due to snorkel spearfishing. Increased intercepts of snorkel spearfishers allowed for the capture of species in shallower and intermediate water depths.

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Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Nathan Van Ee, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), asked whether the fish lengths in the survey data were becoming smaller, but this information was not readily available.
- Frank Parrish, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) Ecosystem Sciences Division (ESD), questioned whether fishing effort had shifted from other gears to spearfishing or if the change was due to data collection efforts and protocol adjustments.
    - Domingo Ochavillo, American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR), stated that the survey methodology likely remained unchanged, as Western Pacific Fishery Information Network (WPacFIN) staff shadowed survey teams and did not report any discrepancies. He noted that both *Caranx lugubris* and *L. kasmira* are commonly caught by spear.
- Marc Nadon, PIFSC Stock Assessment Program (SAP), emphasized the importance of examining both graphs together, as the choice of fishing method (i.e., spear vs. hook and line) depends on the species. He highlighted that the data have a low sample size, making year-to-year variability highly sensitive to chance interceptions. While there was an increase in spearfishing data in 2023, there were no major changes in the creel survey methodology to account for this, suggesting that the variability is likely due to chance.
- Ochavillo asked how many interviews were conducted for the data.
    - Nadon stated that a breakdown of shore vs. boat-based intercepts for BMUS would be needed. BMUS are primarily caught by boat, which can contribute to data noise at the species level in shore-based surveys.
- Remington presented a data summary provided by Nadon, showing that American Samoa's shore-based surveys used for data expansion only included one to four interviews per year that contained BMUS data.
- *The Plan Team closed the work item.*

b. Species-Specific Monitoring

Remington presented that the Plan Team working group met to discuss the development of a template for species-specific reporting in the American Samoa annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report. Following the most recent stock assessment finalized in 2024, the species are managed under single-species Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), but the reporting framework in the annual SAFE report is only for the species complex as an aggregate. To address this, the Working Group proposed a new reporting format that includes the 11 species individually, alongside the total expanded catch data from both shore- and boat-based creel surveys. The group suggested using a three-year running average for comparison against the ACLs in the reports, consistent with the accountability measure for a post-season overage adjustment for the fishery. Remington noted that species-specific effort and catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) metrics would not be reported.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater emphasized that, while effort was discussed, the primary goal is to develop the catch table for ACL monitoring. AMs will be applied under ACL tracking using data provided by WPacFIN.

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- Van Ee suggested including interview counts and the number of fish pieces used in expansions to provide context.
    - Ochavillo noted it became clear during the shore-based discussion that a small number of interviews could impact the data, leading to large variations.
- David O'Brien, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) Sustainable Fisheries Division (SFD) proposed including a measure of uncertainty in the estimates to better assess their reliability.
    - Remington acknowledged that uncertainty measures would be useful, but implementing them before the annual SAFE report revamp may not be advisable.
    - Sabater asked about the feasibility of providing a point estimate of variation for each species per year.
    - Nadon suggested including a 95% confidence interval (CI) or standard deviation (SD), as these metrics are already part of stock assessments.
    - Jenny Suter, WPacFIN, noted that such measures are not currently included in creel expansions but agreed to explore how stock assessments handle them.
    - Brad Gough, WPacFIN, explained that while expansion numbers exist, their application at the species level is unclear. Since expansion involves summing two different sets of data, resolving this issue would be complex.
    - Remington expressed hesitation about adopting a new or novel approach immediately prior to the annual SAFE report revamp and recommended following the stock assessment methodologies in the future.
    - Sabater agreed and suggested addressing the uncertainty issue through the annual SAFE report revamp.
- *The Plan Team approved the table template for use in the 2024 annual SAFE report.*

c. Available FAD Program Data

Remington presented that the Plan Team working group discussed recent challenges with the troll creel survey data coming out of American Samoa. The data has shown inconsistencies, such as a low number of catches and trips two years ago, followed by a doubling of trips the next year with no corresponding increase in catch. The group agreed that additional work is needed to investigate the troll data and explore potential data sources. The Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) Program was introduced as a possible solution to assist with monitoring the troll fishery. While data from the FAD program currently focuses on tournaments and sport fishing, primarily targeting pelagic species, it may provide valuable insights. However, troll data are cryptic in the dataset, and any BMUS catch from bottom-troll mixed trips would be aggregated into bottomfish reporting, rather than being recognized as part of a troll trip. The Working Group discussed whether further investigation into the FAD Program is warranted and explored other potential ways to improve the accuracy and depth of trolling data.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Robert Ahrens, PIFSC Fisheries Research and Monitoring Division (FRMD), stated that it is clear what is being reported under the FAD Program and where overlap exists with the creel surveys.
    - Sabater stated that a review of the FAD Program data is ongoing to see if they can be incorporated with information from the creel surveys. There are two different datasets being analyzed: (1) DMWR staff interviews under the FAD Program, where weekend fishers report their trips, including whether they fished at a FAD

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or not, and (2) creel survey data, which may or may not explicitly capture FAD-related catches. These two datasets need to be evaluated for consistency.

- Parrish asked if creel survey estimates indicate data from FAD catches
    - Ochavillo confirmed that FAD Program data indicate whether fishing occurred at a FAD, but creel survey data does not differentiate. In American Samoa, bottomfishing and trolling sometimes overlap, and trolling around FADs is not always explicitly noted in creel data.
    - Remington suggested that trolling for bait while traveling to bottomfishing grounds might be skewing pelagic trolling data, since those trips may not target pelagic species but still get recorded as a troll trip. He recommended reviewing data expansion methods, particularly for gear types, and ensuring data robustness relative to the American Samoa longline dataset.
- Remington asked whether the Plan Team had interest in further investigating the FAD Program data, and if not, how to improve troll data quality.
    - Ahrens stated that the key issue is whether any subset of trips covered by the FAD Program is missing from the creel survey. The question remains whether the creel survey alone is sufficient for monitoring these fisheries.
    - *Sabater suggested working with DMWR staff to engage weekend fishers, possibly through phone surveys, to ensure data inclusion.*
    - Ahrens noted that, while the impact on pelagic fisheries might be minimal, understanding fish flow to local communities could justify continued analysis.

ii. CNMI

a. Commercial Data Update

Jude Lizama, CNMI DFW, presented on commercial fishery in CNMI, highlighting key trends from 2023 following the complete accounting of commercial purchase receipts. Over the year, there were a total of 4,500 sales, with 49% classified as resales. The market saw participation from 50 buyers and 242 sellers. In terms of landings, the pelagic commercial fishery accounted for 108,000 lb, while the inshore fishery contributed 45,000 lb. Bottomfish landings totaled 6,399 pounds, and invertebrate landings reached 1,633 lb. The pelagic fishery generated $328/lb in revenue, with average prices per pound varying by category – $6.63 for invertebrates, $5.38 for bottomfish, $3.70 for inshore fish, and $3.00 for pelagic species. Notably, there was a 34% decrease in total sales compared to 2022. However, despite the decline in sales, the number of buyers increased while the number of sellers decreased, indicating a shift in market dynamics.;

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Remington asked about the decrease in sales, noting that commercial reporting increased after it became mandatory in 2019, with prior years showing an upward trend.
    - Lizama attributed the decline to economic factors, suggesting 2023 might have been a low point before recovery.
- Remington noted surprise that inshore fishery value exceeded bottomfish.
    - Lizama explained that inshore fish hold greater cultural and economic value, whereas bottomfish, despite being more expensive per pound, are less familiar to consumers and require more marketing.
    - Van Ee shared that bottomfish are often sold to hotels rather than households and suggested that the decline in tourism could be impacting bottomfish sales.

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    - Lizama confirmed that bottomfish fishers typically intend to sell their catch, but fewer buyers are present, with hotels being the primary market.
    - Sabater noted that the CNMI's market dynamics differ, as most stores have contracts with fishers, and bottomfish sales are largely driven by tourism demand. Reef fish are the predominant sellers in stores.
- Van Ee asked about lobster prices, noting that divers report higher prices than those listed, potentially due to differences in direct sales versus market transactions.
    - Remington stated that the price of $6.62/lb was an average across invertebrates.
    - Van Ee agreed that the inclusion of octopus and other invertebrates could be responsible for lowering the average price.
- Minling Pan, PIFSC SEES Program, asked whether the fluctuations in fishery data (e.g., 2021 being high and 2023 being low) could be attributed to the presence of only a few highliners, given the relatively small discrepancies in landings and revenue.
    - Remington shared a figure from the 2023 annual SAFE report, correcting an earlier mistake that 2021 was historically high.
- Pan inquired about the number of commercial bottomfishers in the CNMI.
    - Lizama responded that fewer than 10 people engage in commercial bottomfishing, with some finding themselves classified as recreational fishers due to circumstance rather than preference.

iii. Guam

a. Impact of Weather and Military Closures on Fishing Effort

Mattias Namur, Council contractor, presented on an effort to determine if weather has an impact on fisheries data in Guam. He noted that while there have been many weather events that have impacted Guam, there was no relationship between these events and fish catch. Namur provided examples by gear and by species and noted that there were some increases and declines in catch that were similar across years.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sean Hanser, PIRO Habitat Conservation Division (HCD), asked whether any modeling efforts were being used to extract statistical insights rather than relying solely on individual visualizations, noting that the last graph displayed a temperature model.
    - Namur explained that the data was sourced from the annual SAFE reports and suggested that a different approach would be taken if tasked with drafting a similar report focusing on the total creel survey estimate and its correlation.
    - Remington stated that further expansion was possible if the Plan Team desired but questioned the group's role in the matter.
- Kirsten Leong, PIFSC SEES Program, stated that examining different variables and integrating information from various models could provide valuable insights, depending on the assumptions and interactions considered.
- Sabater mentioned Toby Matthews analyzed the number of bad weather days recorded in the creel survey and noted ongoing efforts to examine the number of interviews in the survey, with the goal of contributing to a future benchmark stock assessment.

iv. Hawaii

a. Bottomfish MUS Aggregation

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Bryan Ishida, State of Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources (HDAR), presented on the availability of BMUS, highlighting market trends and changes in bottomfish availability. Morioka noted that bottomfish were available at the United Fishing Agency (UFA) fish auction in Honolulu for only 72 out of 272 days, which he considered a substantial decrease. He pointed out that the shift in fishing effort from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) to the Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) influenced bottomfish demand. While demand for Deep 7 bottomfish still exists, market behavior has changed, as fishers had warned. There is now a perceived lower market capacity for large offloads of Deep 7 species, and landings have recently decreased. To differentiate between market-driven changes and actual declines in fishery production, Ishida explored commercial landings data, examining registered dealer sales. Due to confidentiality restrictions, UFA data could not be analyzed by themselves due to confidentiality concerns, so the data were aggregated. The number of days Deep 7 species and uku were present in the markets before and after the NWHI closure was assessed. Results showed that Deep 7 presence remained relatively stable at around 300 days, with a slight decrease over time, whereas uku presence began declining after 2017 and remained low.

HDAR's study also examined fish sourcing patterns before and after the NWHI closure. Before the closure, a quarter of uku and half of Deep 7 originated from the NWHI. After the closure, all supply came from the MHI. Uku landings in MHI increased to compensate for the loss. When analyzing individual sales, pre-closure years saw larger offloads (>500-1000 lb) compared to post-closure. The study also compared commercial pounds sold across different islands, revealing that the post-closure market impact was more pronounced on Oahu; other islands showed more stable trends over time for bottomfish. Ishida suggested that the total days of availability do not adequately capture market changes. UFA-specific data might provide clearer insights if available. Additional data on purchase patterns did offer useful perspectives on market shifts. Roy Morioka, fisher, raised specific concerns about UFA, but further analysis would require an agreement with the auction to proceed. Future research will focus on market shifts following the NWHI closure, evolving fishery demographics, the influence of weather patterns on historical versus modern fleets, and pandemic-driven market changes.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Kleiber asked Ishida to expand on how changing demographics are impacting the market.
    - Ishida explained that the older generation of fishers is leaving the fishery and being replaced by a younger small boat fleet. Historically, the bottomfish fishery has gone through different phases - early sampan multi-day trips, the NWHI fishery, and now the small-boat fleet. The older generation was dedicated and knowledgeable, while the newer fishers tend to be expense fishers rather than full-time professionals. They do not exclusively target bottomfish, instead electing to participate in seasonal fishing. This shift has led to a transition from full-time fishing operations to more sporadic, seasonal participation, with individuals less tied to traditional markets and large year-round sales. Instead, they rely on alternative means to sell their fish.
    - Leong noted that shifting markets align with trends observed post-COVID. The range of dealers beyond UFA is important to monitor, as direct sales and social media platforms are increasingly being used across various industries.
- Sabater asked how many dealers there are on Oahu.

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- Ishida responded that there are typically between 35 and 60 dealers, mostly on Oahu, though bottomfish sales occur throughout the islands.

b. Bottomfish Prevalence at UFA

This agenda item was combined with the previous agenda item (2.A.iv.a) – see directly above.

v. Pelagics

a. Socioeconomic Observer Data Collection

Council staff presented an update associated with the Joint Plan Team recommendation from the May 2024 meeting regarding the decline in observer coverage and its impact on socioeconomic data collection. With human observers expected to phase out by 2026, preparations are needed for their absence, which increases the necessity for electronic monitoring (EM). The issue is that observers will no longer be available to collect socioeconomic data, and revising the program would require approval through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). As an alternative, next steps may involve collaborating with UFA and the Hawaii Longline Association (HLA) to collect the necessary data.

Pan noted that the transition from human observers to EM is happening faster than initially planned. Despite declining observer coverage, response rates have been increasing, and data collection for 2024 and 2025 has been successful. PIFSC is currently receiving responses for trip expenditures, which allows for onboard data collection. However, once observers are gone, a new approach will be needed to collect economic data on trip costs. Pan asked for feedback from the Plan Team on the importance of cost information and emphasized the need to capture net revenue rather than just catch revenue. She requested the group to brainstorm the most feasible and cost-effective approach for collecting these data in the future.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater asked whether the logbook program could be used as a platform for socioeconomic data collection.
    - Ashley Tomita, PIFSC FRMD, responded that there is no space in the logbooks to collect these data, and adding fields would require OMB approval under the Paperwork Reduction Act, which would take time. The fields would also need to be duplicated in electronic reporting (ER) logs, making implementation difficult. Tomita mentioned that short-term implementation is unlikely. In the long-term, discussions could take place, but challenges such as training and language barriers on the docks would need to be addressed, including the translation of materials.
    - Leong agreed that modifying the logbook would be complicated due to its structure and the need for OMB approval. Requiring both logbook reporting and a separate survey could further complicate matters.
    - Suter was against integrating socioeconomic surveys into the logbook, stating that it would be complicated and not mandatory. She emphasized that interactions with the longline fishery will continue, and local staff should remain involved. EM sampling can align with observer sampling, and ER staff could assist in maintaining separate data collection.
- Council staff inquired about the possibility of using reporting by the State of Hawaii, but there was uncertainty if the longline fleets reported catch to the State.

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    - Ishida clarified that the data does not go directly to the state but is accessible to them, with NOAA being the primary recipient.
    - Gough confirmed that commercial sales data from longliners are shared with the State of Hawaii, but data on fishing operations are not necessarily shared.
- Pan pointed out that the current sample selection aligns with observer trips, and a new sampling strategy will be needed once human observers are phased out.
    - Crigler wondered whether the success of data collection was partly due to human observers conducting surveys in person, rather than relying on voluntary forms. She suggested exploring opportunities for data collection through personnel picking up EM video at the docks.
    - Lynn Rassel, PIRO SFD, proposed utilizing protected species workshops to ask fishers to estimate average trip costs or report on their last trip.
- Sabater stated that *the Plan Team should continue exploring potential avenues for the socioeconomic survey, including working with the EM team or incorporating it into protected species workshops, while also considering appropriate sampling frequency*.

b. Life History Module

Council staff presented progress on a work item from the Plan Team's May 2023 meeting regarding the development of a life history module for the pelagic annual SAFE report. Council staff sought to ensure it remained a topic of discussion and gather input from Plan Team members. It was noted that a table of life history information is available for pelagic species, which could be incorporated in a manner similar to what has been done for the archipelagic annual SAFE reports. Additionally, there are spatial parameters associated with pelagic life history data collection that could be considered for inclusion in the module.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Eva Schemmel, PIFSC Life History Program (LHP), questioned the reliability of life history data across the pelagic species' full range, noting that while having a baseline is beneficial, the LHP's focus is on understanding species across the Pacific. She pointed out that the life history data do not align well with international efforts and, while useful, may not be as practical as the Plan Team expects. Additionally, Schemmel emphasized that the spatial extent of the data requires significant work for this information to be synthesized and finalized. The LHP prioritizes parameters relevant to stock assessments
- *Council staff deferred additional discussion on this item to the May 2025 meeting.*

vi. Commercial Fishery Data

a. Low Territorial Commercial Reporting

Remington presented on Plan Team working group discussion surrounding the relatively low proportion of commercial catch for territorial bottomfish after the initial inclusion of the non-commercial fishery performance modules for American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI in their respective annual SAFE reports for the first time last year. These modules were developed using supplementary code by Nadon that corrects the commercial data stream to account for species that were previously unidentified. This correction provides better insight into the amount of BMUS sold in each jurisdiction. The working group was charged with examining why the corrected data indicate that, for example, approximately 90% of bottomfish catch are non-commercial in American Samoa. The working group discussed that American Samoa has no

reporting requirements, and many fishers sell their catch roadside. In Guam, reporting is generally low, with sales occurring at flea markets and Micronesian storefronts; however, mandatory vendor reporting is forthcoming. The CNMI has the most balanced proportion of commercial to non-commercial bottomfish sales, with mandatory reporting now in place to maintain data collection efforts. Remington noted that commercial receipts remain the primary source of available data in lieu of using data on fishers' intent to sell their catch collected during creel survey interviews (hereafter "intent-to-sell").

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Brent Tibbatts, Guam DAWR, noted that his agency is holding a meeting on February 10 through 12 regarding mandatory vendor reporting, and he should be able to provide a status update to the Plan Team thereafter.
    - *Remington flagged this agenda item to be added to the May 2025 meeting.*

b. Discrepancies in Commercial Data Streams

Remington presented on Plan Team working group evaluation of proportions of commercial to non-commercial fisher dispositions between the socioeconomic module and territorial non-commercial modules fishery performance to ensure consistency. Depending on where you look in annual SAFE reports, readers may see different values for commercial catch. The discrepancy exists because of Nadon's new approach to correcting commercial catch data (see above). While both the fishery performance and socioeconomic modules rely on the same commercial data sources, intent-to-sell data from creel surveys were also explored to determine if they are appropriate to include in the annual SAFE reports. In American Samoa, a notable discrepancy exists between dealer-reported sales and intent-to-sell responses, while the gap is smaller in the CNMI and Guam. Intent-to-sell data suggests a higher level of commercial catch than previously recorded. Given these inconsistencies, the working group recommended adding caveats to the data until the reports are revised. While intent-to-sell data may be worthy of inclusion going forward, the working group did not think it to be efficient to do so while there are other ongoing processes to holistically evaluate and revamp the reports. Remington asked the Plan Team to consider how to present commercial data, i.e., whether to use a single data stream, present both data sources, or include the original data alongside intent-to-sell figures with caveats.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater suggested including the effort to revise the commercial data streams in the ongoing annual SAFE report revamp process, making necessary adjustments based on overarching Plan Team recommendations. *He recommended proceeding with Option 2 – presenting both data streams with detailed explanations – consistent with the perspective of the working group*.

vii. Oceanic and Ecosystem Indicators

a. Brainstorm of New Recruitment Indices

Remington guided Plan Team members in brainstorming potential recruitment indices for other gears or fisheries on top of the current recruitment index for bigeye tuna. This resulted in two main perspectives: one advocating for refining the current tool exclusively for bigeye tuna, and another supporting the expansion of the index to include swordfish, yellowfin tuna, mahimahi, ono, and/or striped marlin. Plan Team discussion on this item was intended to be exploratory.

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Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Council staff inquired about the impact of losing observer data on forecasting and in-season monitoring, referencing forecasting tools used by PIFSC ESD and the in-season forecasting tool.
    - Crigler clarified that in-season forecasting does not rely on observer data.
    - Lynn Rassel noted that temperature data is recorded only by observers.
    - Tomita explained that observer data is used primarily for average weights in the eastern Pacific, but not used for WCPFC limits due to a lack of landing weight data from the western Pacific. Data from American Samoa are utilized, but not for in-season monitoring.
    - Council staff asked for confirmation that in-season data is not used and that only dockside weights are relied upon, and Tomita confirmed.
- Ahrens asked whether there was any feedback from small boat fishers regarding mahimahi or ono, and asked about possible environmental cues, such as mango flower blooms, that could be integrated.
    - Remington stated that outreach had only been conducted with the PT and not the fishing community.
- Sabater suggested keeping the focus on bigeye tuna but emphasized the need to socialize this idea with the Council's advisory panels, observers, and small boat working group to understand what is the information in which they are interested.
    - Remington clarified that no observer data are used for forecasting; instead, it relies on the median size of phytoplankton from remote sensing, which serves as food for juvenile bigeye tuna.
- Rassel expressed surprise that bycatch data from the observer program, specifically small tunas that are discarded, are not being used if median sizes of small tunas are considered.
    - Remington suggested asking PIFSC whether they incorporate that data.

b. Tula Observatory Data

Remington presented an update on a recommendation by the American Samoa Advisory Panel (AP) that was adopted by the Council to review data from the Tula Observatory on Tutuila for potential inclusion in the climate and oceanic indicators module of the annual SAFE reports. Remington spoke with a representative from the Observatory to obtain available parameters and data. Remington discussed data provided by the Tula Observatory, which included one existing indicator—the concentration of atmospheric CO_2—already collected at Tula. The data are similar to those reported from Mauna Kea. In addition to CO_2, Tula collects data on greenhouse gases, meteorology, radiation, ozone, aerosols, and other environmental factors. The Plan Team considered whether these additional indicators should be included in future analyses or reporting.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater indicated that the atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration data from the Tula Observatory is consistent with those from Mauna Kea and does not add additional value.
    - Crigler agreed and questioned whether other indicators should be included, particularly in light of the annual SAFE report revamp effort and potential revisions of the Climate and Oceanic Indicators module.
    - Sabater concurred that *any additional indicators should be evaluated for inclusion as part of the overarching revamp effort*.

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c. Data Integration / Fishery-Ecosystem Relationships

Remington presented progress from a Plan Team working group evaluating how to incorporate data integration into the annual SAFE reports through improved delineation of fishery-ecosystem relationships, primarily considering fishery performance data and climate indicators. The working group, which first convened in November 2024, was charged with exploring feasibility of efforts such as developing an index of fishable conditions based on climatic and oceanic data, incorporating environmental variability into stock assessments, and evaluating the feasibility of dynamic fisheries management. Key takeaways included the need to enhance data collection, address gaps in biological and life history data, and prioritize the collation of existing fishery-ecosystem linkages. The working group started compiling documented relationships and plans to expand this effort, potentially seeking insights from external experts and institutions. Working group members felt that the annual SAFE reports should not look to determine new relationships but rather monitor established ones. Moving forward, discussions will focus on next steps, including continued documentation, adaptive management strategies, and potential funding opportunities for further research.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater wondered aloud whether Plan Team members are responsible for developing the fishery ecosystem relationships section before clarifying that, while the Plan Team is not the appropriate body to develop those relationships, they can use existing information. He suggested documenting different studies on ecosystem relationships in a matrix format and identifying gaps for incorporation into the Council's MSRA research plan or other priority documents.
    - Suter agreed, emphasizing the importance of understanding ongoing research and how it could inform the annual SAFE report revamp.
    - Ochavillo noted that reviewing existing work is a significant task and aligns more with a research program.
    - Remington emphasized the difficulty in demonstrating how environmental factors impact fisheries management decisions, which is a common challenge across regions. He suggested a literature review to establish linkages.
- Hanser stated that this effort aligns with Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management (EBFM). Identifying fishery-species relationships could support adaptive management in places like American Samoa, where data is limited. He suggested leveraging frameworks like those used for CEFI.
    - Sabater agreed and suggested using existing environmental data tables as a starting point, possibly involving a summer intern for analysis.
    - Leong noted that large-scale initiatives like EBFM focus on providing useful data, and the Plan Team should ensure that model developers clearly articulate decision-making processes.
    - Hanser agreed and suggested that, like Alaska's fishery ecosystem plans, the Plan Team should clarify what they are managing and in what context.
- Remington noted the importance of identifying established links between environmental conditions and fisheries performance. He suggested inviting Alaska experts to share research methodologies.
    - Sabater asked whether there was interest in examining Alaska's data, and Crigler supported the idea.

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    - Suter referenced a presentation by Kalei Shadwell from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center on Ecosystem Status Reports (ESRs) and social profiles. Consolidating such information would be useful but would require funding.
    - Remington agreed that funding remains a challenge. He questioned whether identifying data gaps and securing funding should fall within the Plan Team's responsibilities, possibly involving the PIFSC Life History Program. A recommendation to the Council could include a funding request.
        - Sabater agreed, stating that framing these issues appropriately would help integrate them into research priorities.
    - Schemmel highlighted that fisheries in the Pacific are more nuanced than those in Alaska, making direct comparisons difficult. She suggested focusing on engaging fishers and conducting targeted workshops over time.
        - Remington asked if gathering biological samples for managed species would be beneficial, to which Schemmel responded affirmatively, noting that current budget and staffing constraints limit their ability to do more.
- Ochavillo pointed out that changes in fisheries might not always be climate-driven but could result from regional fishing pressure or societal and cultural shifts.
- Rassel stated that understanding fish spawning periods would help with adaptive management, possibly using photographic data of fish gonads.
- *The Plan Team reached consensus to invite Alaska researchers for a presentation and incorporate relevant insights into research priorities at the May 2025 meeting.*

viii. Online Portal Review

Remington reminded Plan Team members of the existence of the Council's online portal for the annual SAFE reports at wpcouncildata.org and asked the Plan Team to review its adequacy as the annual SAFE report revamp effort also initiates. Remington plans to send an email to solicit feedback from the group.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Sabater asked whether additional sections should be added to the portal if needed.
- Remington explained that the portal started with fishery performance and gradually expanded to include climate and oceanic indicators, socioeconomics, and protected species, building it out piece by piece. He emphasized the need for review to determine if further expansion is necessary or if it should wait.
- Sabater noted that the portal is useful for quick reference instead of searching through a PDF but stressed consideration of the annual SAFE report revamp to avoid creating unnecessary work if updates will be dropped later.

B. Public Comment on Day 1 Agenda Items

There was no public comment.

C. Ecosystem Component Species Management

i. Presentation on How to Manage ECS

Sabater provided a brief overview, noting that representatives from NOAA Office of Sustainable Fisheries (OSF) will be invited to the May 2025 meeting (see following agenda item, 2.C.ii).

ii. Examples from Other Councils

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Sabater provided an overview of how other Councils apply National Standard 1 guidelines for the management of Ecosystem Component Species (ECS). These species do not require conservation and management mandates but remain in the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to support ecosystem objectives. ECS species are mostly caught in jurisdictional waters, and the WPFMC Fishery Ecosystem Plans (FEP) aim to maintain biologically diverse and productive ecosystems. While ECS species can be stocks or complexes, the challenge is that once they are designated as ECS, they lose management priority. In the Pacific, ECS focuses primarily on forage fish. Legal interpretations suggest that management measures cannot be applied to certain species. While the North Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils have incorporated management measures for forage fish ECS, the Western Pacific primarily uses ECS for data collection and reporting. Other regions have actual management measures for ECS, whereas in the Pacific, ECS are used for tracking and advisory purposes rather than active regulation.

Plan Team discussion on this topic included the following:

- O'Brien inquired about the Regional Coordinating Group's response regarding ECS.
    - Sabater responded that this step had not yet been completed, and they hoped to receive a presentation from OCF or the NOAA Office of Science and Technology. The team had not yet discussed the issue with NOAA General Counsel Pacific Islands (GCPI).
- Hanser emphasized that in federal waters, the MSA designates Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and associated species, which are used for consultations and conservation recommendations. State waters conservation efforts intersect with federal management, particularly regarding species take regulations. ECS is used as a guideline for regulatory decisions, particularly for coral reef protection.
- Council staff pointed out that no ECS currently exist for pelagic species, even though some pelagic species exist primarily in international waters. This raises the question of whether the Pelagic FEP should include ECS or if they should remain within the Archipelagic FEP.
    - Sabater suggested that moving certain secondary pelagic species to the archipelagic Feps aligns with small-boat fishery operations and international considerations. Better data collection would clarify whether an assessment should be developed for potential direct management.
    - Council staff recommended conducting an inventory to ensure comprehensive species coverage.
- Remington referenced the 2019 ECS amendment that classified many reef MUS as ECS, questioning what had been done since to achieve associated management objectives. He raised concerns that ECS classification might be a tool to move species away from MUS rather than ensuring active conservation.
    - Sabater noted that ECS discussions with Council staff had become more deliberate. While ECS has a management component, the current data-limited assessment prevents further action. Other regions, such as the Mid-Atlantic, have clearly defined ECS roles without overriding state waters management.
    - Ahrens stated that MUS classification enables meaningful management, whereas ECS species should be monitored for biodiversity. Co-management strategies might be necessary, especially in areas where a significant portion of the habitat exists in federal waters. He also pointed out a funding gap for coral reef monitoring in the Pacific Islands.

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    - Crigler suggested developing a protocol for species not managed under an FMP.
    - O'Brien highlighted past ECS amendments that classified many MUS without adequate data, making management challenging.
- Parrish highlighted the importance of forage fish and herbivores in the ecosystem, questioning if similar cases exist where species were removed from management. He pointed to observations at Penguin Bank and deepwater parrotfish occurrences.
    - Hanser noted that regulatory considerations often prioritize habitat-forming species, such as corals and bivalves, due to their foundational ecological role. Many species, including parrotfish, were moved to ECS classification. Hanser proposed reconsidering EFH definitions to incorporate ECS-related protections instead of broad ECS classification.
- Leong emphasized the need to define objectives for ECS species, considering cultural significance and ecological function.
    - Remington stressed the importance of defining ECS objectives and deciding on necessary actions. He emphasized the need to monitor ECS while respecting jurisdictional partners.
    - Ahrens suggested analyzing existing data, such as coral reef monitoring programs, to refine ECS classifications.
    - Pan recommended assessing species based on natural ecosystem importance versus human interaction impacts, separating species with minimal human interaction as a priority for evaluation.
- Crigler proposed taking incremental steps before the next meeting in May, beginning with defining objectives for ECS species.
    - Sabater suggested forming a small working group to define ECS roles and objectives, involving OSF, OST, and GCPI representatives.
    - Council staff suggested that involving Advisory Panels (APs) could be beneficial.
    - Sabater cautioned against prematurely presenting ECS concepts to APs before finalizing the working group's recommendations. He recommended first securing GCPI's position before proceeding with broader discussions.
    - Crigler and Leong agreed that Council input should be sought first before expanding discussions to other advisory bodies.
- *The Plan Team reached consensus to form a working group to develop criteria to identify and/or ECS and their associated management objectives, if applicable, relevant to each of the FEPs and report to the Plan Team at its May 2025 meeting. Criteria should take into account FEP objectives, jurisdictional issues, and Council management efficacy.*

iii. Ecosystem Objectives

This agenda item was combined with previous agenda items (2.C.i and 2.C.ii) – see directly above.

iv. How to Promote to an MUS

This agenda item was combined with previous agenda items (2.C.i and 2.C.ii) – see above.

v. GCPI Perspective

This agenda item was combined with previous agenda items (2.C.i and 2.C.ii) – see above.

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3. Non-Commercial Fishery Performance

A. Pelagic Territorial Non-Commercial Module

Remington an update on the APT working group's efforts to develop a non-commercial module for territorial pelagic MUS, modeled after a similar module for territorial BMUS and ECS. The working group, which convened in November 2024, focused on addressing gaps in dealer report data and species-level inconsistencies, particularly the exclusion of certain commercial sales channels like restaurants and roadside vendors. Three approaches were considered for estimating non-commercial catch: subtracting commercial catch from total catch, using fisher disposition data, and applying mixed methods based on survey proportions. The group ultimately recommended a simplified method using total catch from creel surveys multiplied by the proportion of intended sales, as this approach accounts for gear type and species considerations while maintaining clarity. The working group highlighted challenges in applying previous commercial data corrections to pelagic species and the need for further evaluation of the proposed methodology. Next steps involve gathering feedback and refining the approach.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Ochavillo stated it is important to include caveats on challenges in developing catch estimates, as they are often underestimated. Creel survey protocols, particularly for coral reef fisheries, show that actual sales are much higher than the total catches. A qualifying narrative should be added.
    - Hongguang Ma, PIFSC FRMD, clarified that longline commercial catch is not included in the estimates.
    - Remington stated that the focus should be on non-longline commercial fishing in the territories, highlighting concerns about the reliability of commercial data for both pelagic and archipelagic fisheries.
- Tomita suggested estimating total commercial receipts using a percentage coverage factor and sought feedback on the simplest approach.
    - Leong noted that intentions to sell do not always align with actual behavior, as motivations for fishing trips may differ from catch usage. Leong emphasized that not all catch is sold, even when intent-to-sell is reported, and that even small portions retained for personal use still benefit communities.
- Pan questioned why creel survey data is being used for pelagic fisheries and emphasized the need for consistency in estimating non-commercial data.
    - Tibbatts highlighted that in Guam, many vendors do not report sales, leading to gaps in commercial data, though fishers who sell their catch do report.
    - Nadon pointed out inconsistencies in dealer reports, where intent-to-sell data does not always align with actual sales. In American Samoa, fishers reported selling all catch roadside, but these sales were not reflected in dealer reports. Nadon suggested expanding the intent-to-sell question to improve accuracy and consistency, noting that most fishers either sell their entire catch or none at all.
    - Pan supported using a commercial receipt book for consistency across jurisdictions and raised concerns about changing the time series.
- Remington expressed apprehension about forming another working group but recognized the merit of a single meeting to refine data presentation.
    - Suter proposed using all available socio-economic and stock survey data to improve reporting rather than relying on mathematical adjustments.

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        - Ma noted that commercial reports classify non-reported catch as non-commercial, though socioeconomic groups may define it differently.
    - Crigler suggested presenting the data as is, acknowledging its limitations. Nadon agreed, suggesting to present the data with clear explanations in text regarding non-commercial catch.
- Tomita asked whether there is a requirement to include non-commercial data in the annual SAFE reports or if it is just a matter of presenting available data, but Remington confirmed the requirement
- Gough stressed the need to compare stock assessment data with interviews, as discrepancies exist.
- Suter urged quick action to resolve the issue, as discussions have been ongoing for over three years without a clear resolution.
- *The Plan Team reached consensus on forming a small working group to finalize the development of the module.*

B. Nature of MRIP Surveys and HMRFS Representative

This agenda item was deferred to the May 2025 Plan Team meeting.

C. A New Approach to the Hawaii MUS Non-Commercial Module

Jason Helyer, HDAR, explored alternative scenarios for estimating non-commercial Deep 7 bottomfish catch in the Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) to address stakeholder concerns about existing data sources like MRIP and HMRFS. The analysis examines different fisher groups using commercial marine license (CML) data, boat fishing vessel registry, and fishery reporting systems (FRS) to identify representative non-commercial fishers. A resampling approach can be applied to generate effort and catch distributions, comparing results with existing stock assessments. Findings indicate high variability in non-commercial catch estimates. The exploration highlights the value of local data, social science contributions, and improved stakeholder communication to enhance understanding of non-commercial fishery dynamics.

Plan Team discussion on this topic included the following:

- Ma clarified that MRIP data use mean weight for the overall catch estimation.
    - Nadon noted feedback from fishing communities indicating that MRIP estimates are too high, delaying the Deep 7 stock assessment in Hawaii. Efforts are ongoing to refine MRIP catch estimates for the purposes of stock assessment and ACL tracking. A pilot study on a new effort survey is expected to produce results this summer. There are several ongoing relevant actions.
- The Plan Team considered that there are various viable approaches to estimating non-commercial bottomfish catch in Hawaii: the Helyer method, the approach used in PIFSC stock assessments, and HMRFS/MRIP expansions.
    - Council staff mentioned upcoming community meetings from March to May to gather feedback on different estimation approaches, with results expected by May.
- Pan referenced Heyler's comment on small boat surveys, questioning whether fishers identify as commercial or non-commercial and how they estimate total catch, as different types of fishers may provide different insights.
- Nadon stated that there are 300 boats in the bottomfish registry annually that do not have a CML. He wondered whether highliners should be filtered out and if socioeconomic studies should be incorporated in this regard

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D. Discussion: Hawaii Non-Commercial Module

This agenda item was combined with the previous agenda item (3.C) – see directly above.

E. Discussion: Including Uku Non-Commercial Catch

Council staff led the Plan Team in a discussion on the most feasible way to include uku non-commercial catch estimates in the annual SAFE report given that the data are used for ACL monitoring for the species. The final rule published in the Federal Register and regulations for the uku ACL require monitoring of both commercial and non-commercial catch. Since HMRFS data is included in the rule, it must be incorporated into the fishery performance tracking against the ACL. Council staff prompted Plan Team members to come to a decision on how to report uku non-commercial catch estimates without a dedicated non-commercial module, and specifically whether data should be included within the fishery performance module or addressed separately.

Plan Team discussion on this topic included the following:

- Ma noted that for uku non-commercial catch estimates, PIRO uses HMRFS catch data to track non-commercial catch.
    - Remington clarified that while PIRO does track in-season monitoring, the annual SAFE report does not include this information, and if/how it is presented to the public is an internal decision.
    - O'Brien confirmed that internal tracking is conducted but not published, relying on PIFSC information on recreational catch at the end of the year.
- Nadon pointed out that in-season tracking is not feasible because MRIP is not designed for that purpose, as its data are too variable and only available months later. Instead, post-season ACL tracking is based on a three-year moving average of total catch, not just HMRFS data.
- Council staff mentioned that an uku project is ongoing in the state, and results will provide better insights once available.
- Helyer suggested that if something needs to be reported in the SAFE report, it should present what is currently known, including MRIP data, rather than expanding estimates. Past non-commercial estimates could also be included for context.
    - Crigler supported this approach.
    - Nadon emphasized that the SAFE report should present available data with clear caveats about its limitations, reiterating the importance of transparency.
        - O'Brien agreed, suggesting that the three-year moving ACL average should be presented, as the information is publicly available on the NOAA website.
- Crigler agreed that the non-commercial data module should not be presented at this time.

4. Public Comment on Day 2 Agenda Items

There was no public comment.

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5. Annual SAFE Report Revamp Status Update

Remington provided an update on the ongoing working group effort to revamp the annual SAFE reports, which aims to improve fishery performance modules and report structure through a multi-year process. Key initiatives discussed include integrating historical context and regulatory changes, incorporating economic and environmental data, and ensuring consistency with regulations and FEP provisions. The working group emphasized streamlining content, improving accessibility of ACL tracking and stock status information, and exploring automation for future updates. Next steps include forming smaller subgroups to address specific issues, prioritizing content, and updating the online, interactive platform to enhance data presentation and usability.

Plan Team discussion on this working group update included the following:

- Suter noted the purpose of the effort of revamping the report is to better represent data and improve clarity. She asked about writing responsibilities and whether the Plan Team is charged with improving the reports.
    - Sabater stated that Plan Team members are responsible for writing their respective sections. Members representing the data should prepare write-ups on fishery performance before the full meeting in May.
    - Remington emphasized that SAFE reports reflect the FEPs, and each section should be authored by those generating the data. However, recent years have seen inconsistencies in section ownership.
- Suter inquired whether all regulations were accounted for in the report.
    - Remington confirmed that most regulatory requirements are included without major gaps. The focus should be on presenting data more intuitively while removing unnecessary content.
    - Suter noted that improving data presentation is separate from adding missing sections and emphasized the importance of retaining all relevant information.
    - Remington suggested revising and reorganizing sections to improve the report's structure, include longer time series, and enhance narrative consistency.
    - Suter pointed out the lack of graphs and suggested incorporating more visual elements. She asked if there were 508 compliance requirements.
    - Remington explained that the pelagic report includes graphs, while the archipelagic report does not. Differences arose due to varying group approaches.
- Sabater provided historical context, explaining that prior to 2016, an annual report served as the proxy SAFE report for NMFS. The focus had been on maximizing data availability through tables rather than narratives, as narratives were challenging to prepare before the annual Plan Team meeting. However, recent discussions highlighted the value of narratives in explaining the data. While most regulatory requirements are met, discussions have focused on improving the annual SAFE reports, particularly in making them more user-friendly for the public and managers. The effectiveness of the report in achieving these goals should be considered.

6. Council Actions

A. Tier 6 ABC Control Rule

Remington presented on the Council's initial action to remove the Tier 6 Acceptable Biological Catch control rule from the AS BMUS revisions and apply it to all FEPs. The Plan Team

previously worked to develop a mechanism for additional species that are data-poor to be evaluated with a rate-based approach rather than a catch-based approach that is currently used. While the approach was initially developed for the change in AS BMUS, the Council saw the utility in providing the SSC with this approach as a tool for all MUS in developing an ABC. The Plan Team was asked to provide its recommendation of either keeping the Tier 6 for AS BMUS only or to recommend it be applied to all MUS.

Plan Team discussion on this proposed Council action included the following:

- Sabater stated that the data-limited situation applies to all FEPs, not just American Samoa, and supported pulling applying Tier 6 criteria out of the BMUS revision action.
- Parrish supported using size data in data-limited situations but questioned confidence in its accuracy.
    - Nadon noted that there is no general rule that size data is less reliable than CPUE and suggested evaluating its reliability on a stock-by-stock basis.
    - Remington noted that additional initiatives exist to collect length data, providing alternative sources of information
- Council staff emphasized making Tier 6 criteria available as a tool for the stock assessment program to explore different thresholds and improve stock assessments.
- Nadon pointed out that while length data can help determine fishing mortality, it introduces confusion regarding whether management should focus on catch limits, size limits, bag limits, or closures. He questioned whether absolute limits should continue to be the primary management tool.
- Sabater stated that it is up to the Plan Team to recommend an omnibus amendment. If treated as a standalone issue, further refinements would be needed. The timing aligns with the release of national technical guidelines and the National SSC meeting.
- The Plan Team achieved consensus supporting Option 2.

B. American Samoa Bottomfish MUS Revision Updates

Remington provided a presentation on the revision of the BMUS list in American Samoa. The revision aims to ensure that the BMUS listed in the American Samoa FEP require federal management and accurately represent the bottomfish fishery. The update follows the conclusion of the rebuilding plan and the specification of ACLs for the current 11 BMUS, along with the removal of the Tier 6 ABC Control Rule from the proposed action. The action team provided three alternatives: maintaining the status quo (Alternative 1), revising the BMUS list to reclassify five species as Ecosystem Component Species (ECS) and adding seven new BMUS (Alternative 2), or a more selective revision that reduces the BMUS list to six species based on management benefits (Alternative 3). The proposed changes are administrative in nature and are not expected to significantly alter fishery operations, given recent declines in participation. Moving forward, the Council and NMFS will continue monitoring catches and collaborating with American Samoa DMWR to manage reclassified species. Remington invited the Plan Team to provide feedback on the proposed changes before a final Council decision at the March meeting.

Plan Team discussion on this proposed Council action included the following:

- O'Brien saw Alternative 3 for the first time and appreciated its management perspective. He noted concerns about the ESC amendment affecting EFH and felt Alternative 3 included many of the impacted species.

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    - Nadon explained that Alternative 2 was developed with deepwater snappers in mind, mainly found in federal waters, which is why uku was excluded. He questioned whether Alternative 3 adds significant work, given that many of the species are rare and were grouped as indicator species. He acknowledged that while this approach makes sense from a stock assessment perspective, it may not from a management perspective.
    - Remington noted that ten components are considered when evaluating species, including whether rare species are a meaningful part of the fishery.
    - Nadon clarified that rarity in this context could mean species are rarely caught rather than naturally rare, raising concerns about linking additional species to indicator species under Alternative 2.
    - Sabater expressed concern over the term "rare" and asked which species comprise the deepwater BF fishery in American Samoa.
- Schemmel highlighted the importance of collecting data on these species now if they are to be managed in the future. If they are BMUS, data will be collected, though some species not typically sampled could be added.
- Sabater asked for the preferred alternative, noting that Alternative 1 was not a viable option.
    - O'Brien supported Alternative 3 and pointed out that the ten criteria for evaluating species are incomplete. The key question is whether management would benefit these species.
        - Nadon questioned the workload associated with using indicator species.
        - O'Brien noted that from a stock assessment perspective, the process would be quick but would require additional management obligations.
    - Ochavillo leaned toward Alternative 3, acknowledging that it would create more work but recognizing the need to balance management requirements with the small scale of the fishery. He expressed concern that the lack of data would make managing the fishery difficult.
    - Nadon supported Alternative 3, emphasizing that if any assessed species had enough data and showed signs of overfishing, effort restrictions would likely impact Paracaesio species.
- *The Plan Team recommended the Council change its preferred alternative and select Alternative 3 instead. The Plan Team was concerned that the fishery is small and management would require additional data that is not available. Alternative 3 would be compatible with the current scale of the fishery. Alternative 3 would also provide time for the Council and NMFS to work on improving data and when the data is available for management, elevate species to the MUS list.*

C. ACL Specifications

i. CNMI Bottomfish

Council staff presented that the ACL specifications for the CNMI bottomfish expires in December 2025. PIFSC said they are currently doing a data review to look at what would be feasible whether they would provide an update stock assessment or extend the catch projections that were provided in the 2019 benchmark territorial bottomfish stock assessment.

Sabater said that PIFSC conducted a review of available data, and the WPSAR steering committee will discuss the review schedule for 2025 and beyond. Regarding CNMI bottomfish,

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the PIFSC SAP found that there was enough data to run a stock assessment update, and PIFSC anticipates a draft stock assessment update by April 2025 for WPSAR review.

There was no Plan Team discussion on this agenda item.

ii. MHI Uku

Council staff presented the options to specify ACLs and AMs for the MHI uku fishery for fishing years 2026 to 2029. In December 2024, the SSC received a presentation on the 2024 uku stock assessment update that found the fishery was not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The SSC endorsed the stock assessment update as BSIA and recommended the Council direct staff to develop options to specify ABCs and ACLs. Council staff provided an overview of the options for Council consideration. Under option 1, the Council would not specify ACLs for fishing years 2026 to 2028. This options serves as a NEPA baseline although it does not comply with National Standard 1 of the MSA and the Hawaii FEP. Under option 2, the Council may specify ACLs based on the 2020 benchmark stock assessment and the findings of the 2020 P* and SEEM working groups at an ACL of 41 percent and ACT at 36 percent correlated with 295,419 lb and 291,010 lb, respectively. This option would not comply with National Standard 2 under the MSA which states that management should be based on BSIA. Under option 3, the Council may specify ACLs based on the 2024 stock assessment update and the findings of the 2020 P* and SEE analysis at an ACL of 41 percent risk of overfishing at 419,980 lbs. Under option 4, the Council may specify ACLs based on the 2024 stock assessment update and the findings of the 2020 P* and SEEM working groups at an ACL of 41 percent and ACT at 36 percent correlated with 419,980 lb and 414,469 lb, respectively. Under option 5, the Council may specify an ACT 10 percent lower than the findings of the P* and SEEM analysis. For AMs, the plan team may recommend implementing measures consistent with previous specifications that include in-season monitoring for commercial catch based on the Hawaii CML and HMRFS data where NMFS could close the fishery in federal water if they project that the fishery may approach or exceed the proposed ACL or ACT. As a post-season AM, the Council may recommend a post-season three year average overage adjustment if the fishery exceeds the ACL. This is not expected based on the recent fishery history.

Plan Team discussion on this proposed Council action included the following:

- Nadon emphasized the need to move away from in-season monitoring for uku, as relying on a fixed ratio approach would provide a steadier increase in confidence and reduce susceptibility to outliers. He noted that a three-year average would help smooth anomalies.
- Sabater proposed eliminating in-season tracking of uku catch, instead implementing a post-season overage adjustment using a three-year running average. He also questioned whether maintaining an ACT was necessary.
    - Council staff explained that through the Council's ACL specification process, the P* and SEEM working groups evaluate different fisheries in different ways.
- Council staff asked whether the Plan Team preferred Option 3, which considers the outcomes of the P* working group alongside socioeconomic and ecological factors, or if they should revise Option 4 to propose a new ACL specification.
    - Sabater clarified that consistency with the existing process is key. He suggested that, instead of setting a traditional ACT, an ACL could be established at a level

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of 36% risk of overfishing. This approach would account for management uncertainty but would not require in-season catch tracking.
    - O'Brien agreed that if in-season management is not feasible due to data quality issues, an ACT does not need to be defined. Instead, the ACL could be set following the P* and SEEM framework.
    - Ahrens supported eliminating in-season monitoring, opting for Option 3, stating that using a ratio approach would be no different than relying on MRIP data.
- Nadon expressed surprise at the ACT's P* level being set at 36%, as this was inconsistent with his recollection of the assessment. He confirmed that 36% corresponds to 188 metric tons from the latest assessment table.
- *Sabater suggested a revised alternative where the Plan Team recommends an ACL based on a 36% risk of overfishing, accounting for all SEEM dimensions, and incorporating a post-season overage adjustment with a three-year running average. The Plan Team achieved consensus.*

iii. MHI Kona Crab

Council staff presented that the ACL specifications for the MHI Kona crab fishery expires in December 2026. PIFSC said they are currently doing a data review to look at what would be feasible whether they would provide an update stock assessment or extend the catch projections that were provided in the 2019 benchmark kona crab stock assessment.

There was no Plan Team discussion on this agenda item.

iv. MHI Deepwater Shrimp and Precious Corals

Council staff presented the specification of the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) deepwater shrimp and precious coral annual catch limits (ACL) for fishing years 2026, 2027, and 2028. The effects analysis showed no significant adverse effects on the physical and biological resources, socio-economic and management setting, and cumulative impacts. The plant was presented with the alternatives of no action (do not specify ACLs) or status quo (re-specifying the existing ACLs) for its consideration.

Plan Team discussion on this proposed Council action included the following:

- Parrish noted that maintaining the status quo is not an option and asked what happens if an ACL is not specified.
    - Council staff clarified that failing to specify an ACL would result in non-compliance with National Standard 1 of the MSA.
- Parrish mentioned that dive surveys were conducted to re-estimate MSY at the Makapuu precious coral bed, which contributes to EFH designations. However, only one dive survey was completed, and it was situated in the middle of the bed. Parrish questioned whether an ACL could be set without an updated MSY estimate or if the previous ACL should be used.
    - Council staff suggested the Plan Team recommend Council staff to reassess the ACLs based on the new MSY estimate. However, if the data are not deemed BSIA, the ACL could remain unchanged.
- Ahrens noted that the data used to specify the new ACLs are outdated, and he questioned whether additional funding could be provided to bring the fishery into compliance with

the MSA. Ahrens emphasized that, from a scientific perspective, the current management approach is inadequate, as it is not based on recent data.
    - Sabater echoed Ahrens' concerns.
    - Council staff stated that a reassessment of MSA priorities could be necessary but reaffirmed that updating MSY remains a priority. However, progress is contingent on the availability of funds allocated to PIFSC.
- *The Plan Team reached consensus on Option 2 to roll over the current ACLs given the present lack of new scientific information.*

D. Pelagic Action Updates and Discussion

i. Electronic Monitoring

Council staff presented on the status of developing a proposal for the Pelagic FEP to implement electronic monitoring (EM) in longline fisheries. The Council took initial action at its December meeting, directing an Action Team to develop an amendment to authorize the use of EM in pelagic longline fisheries for reliable estimation of protected species interactions and to phase it in as an optional program through 2027 until permanent resources are available to implement a mandatory program. The Action Team is in the process of developing a proposed amendment for final action at the Council's June 2025 meeting. Staff requested Plan Team input in order to provide the Action Team with additional information as it develops alternatives.

Plan Team discussion on this topic included the following:

- Pan asked whether the presentation would cover the initial number of EM systems, considering that some systems are mobile and move between vessels.
    - Council staff responded that the EM systems are fixed and outfitted on 20 vessels. They are retrofitted and meant to last three years. The discussion at hand pertains to installing systems to the remaining vessels.

ii. Crew Training

Council staff provided an update on crew training requirements. At the November Pelagic Plan Team meeting, a draft crew training program was presented, partially fulfilling the Reasonable and Prudent Measures (RPMs) outlined in the Hawai'i Longline (HILL) and American Samoa Longline (ASLL) biological opinions (BiOps). The presentation covered regulatory requirements and key decision points, including whether certification should be annual or multi-year for vessel owners. The Plan Team's recommendations from the November meeting were forwarded to the Council. Following the meeting, NOAA General Counsel (GC) advised that the proposed regulatory approach was inconsistent with the BiOp RPM language. Specifically, the BiOp requires at least one trained crew member on deck to oversee and direct hauling activities.

At the 201st Council meeting, two regulatory approaches were presented regarding crew certification and the person-on-deck requirement. The Council's recommendations aligned mostly with the Plan Team's suggestions, barring the consideration of exceptions to the crew training requirement; NOAA GC advised that the RPM language does not allow any exceptions. groups. The Council directed the action team to refine the regulatory approach while incorporating the Council's recommendations and the action team continues to refine the proposed approach with input from Council advisory groups. An update will be provided at the March 2025 Council meeting. Additionally, the Council requested NMFS to ensure the crew training program is accessible, including a potential appointment system, to prevent the

requirement from becoming burdensome. A full analysis and draft regulations will be presented at the June 2025 Council meeting, with a review by the Plan Team at its preceding meeting in May 2025.

There was no Plan Team discussion on this agenda item.

iii. North Pacific Striped Marlin

Council staff provided an update on the US catch limits for the North Pacific striped marlin. The WCPFC21 adopted WCPFC CMM 2024-06, addressing the management of these catch limits.

Plan Team discussion on this topic included the following:

- Tomita raised the question about whether catch is being measured similarly to retained catch, like in the case of bigeye tuna (BET).
    - Council staff clarified that all catch, not just retained catch, is being measured.
- Tomita inquired about the importance of determining the disposition of discards (i.e., alive or dead) and whether it needs to be addressed.
    - Council staff responded that there is no provision for tracking the disposition. Once the catch limit is reached, the recommendation is to release striped marlin as practically as possible.
- Crigler noted that this recommendation originated from the previous Plan Team meeting, which emphasized the need to develop a method for monitoring striped marlin discards. Updates on this matter are expected at the full May 2025 meeting of the Plan Team.
    - Council staff confirmed that the recommendation was included in the omnibus letter sent to PIFSC.

7. Other Business

Remington noted to the annual SAFE report section authors that their respective modules will be sent out in late January or early February.

Council staff shared that there is a Council recommendation stemming from the Plan Team and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to form a working group to address the SSC's concerns regarding changes in fishery performance for Hawaii longline fisheries. This includes examining the issue of hyper-depletion, where catchability decreases as fishing effort increases. The working group is expected to receive more information on this topic. Interested individuals can contact Council staff via email for further involvement. This recommendation came from both the Plan team and the SSC.

Council staff indicated that they are scoping meeting times for the full meetings of the Plan Team for the week of May 5, 2025, once again in a joint format.

8. Public Comment on Day 3 Agenda Items

There was no public comment.

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9. Discussion and Recommendations

Recommendations

Regarding Tier 6, the Plan Team Supports Option 2 adding the provision to all FEPs.

Regarding AS BMUS, the Plan Team recommended the Council change its preferred alternative and select Alternative 3 instead. The Plan Team was concerned that the fishery is small and management would require additional data that is not available. Alternative 3 would be compatible with the current scale of the fishery. Alternative 3 would also provide time for the Council and NMFS to work on improving data and when the data is available for management elevate species to the MUS list.

Regarding MHI uku, the Plan Team recommends the Council specify an ACL at P*=36% based on the 2020 P* and SEEM analyses. Further, the Plan Team recommends discontinuing in-season monitoring due to the uncertainty in data and specifying a post season three year average overage adjustment accountability measures**.**

Regarding Shrimp and Precious Coral ACLs, since there is no new scientific info available, the Plan Team recommends the council select option 2, to roll over the current ACLs.

Work Items

- Continue to explore potential avenues forward for the socioeconomic survey through personal implementing electronic monitoring in the field (PIRO/PIFSC/Council) or protected species workshop (PIRO SFD) to look at sampling frequency as well;
- Regarding discrepancies in commercial data streams for archipelagic bottomfish fisheries, the Plan Team agreed to Option 2 (present both and provide ample explanation as to why)
- Regarding new recruitment indices in the Oceanic and Climate Indicator module: Keep to bigeye tuna but need to socialize this idea and ask AP/Fisher Obs/SBWG on what information they are interested in;
- Regarding May Mtg, Ask AFSC for a presentation on ecosystem relationships/data integration; LH Module; Nature of MRIP Surveys by MRIP/HMRFS; OSF/OST on ECS
- Regarding data integration/ecosystem relationships-add to research priorities
- The Joint Plan Team forms a working group to develop criteria to identify and/or refine ecosystem component species (ECS) and their associated management objectives, if applicable, relevant to each of the fishery ecosystem plans (FEPs) and report to the Plan Team at its May 2025 meeting. Criteria should take into account FEP objectives, jurisdictional issues, and improving Council management efficacy. Working group members to include Bryan Ishida, David O'Brien, Kirsten Leong, Sean Hanser, Rob Ahrens, Frank Parrish, Marlowe Sabater, and Mark Fitchett.
- Regarding Pelagic non-commercial module: The Plan Team forms a small group to include Minling Pan, Marc Nadon, Jenny Suter, Hongguan Ma, Ashley Tomita, Brad Gough, Marlowe Sabater, Danica Kleiber, Kirsten Leong and need to add reps from jurisdictions here as well

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- Regarding Hawaii non-commercial the Council as community meetings coming in March, April and May. Options as suggested by Jason on different approaches to figure out and ask what is the closest seen.