

Council Proposes a New Pacific Strategy to Advance US Interests Through Fisheries

With China vying for greater influence in the Pacific, concerns over food security amid the current supply chain crisis and inflation, the importance of fisheries to the people of the Western Pacific Region has never been so apparent. Fisheries are critical to the welfare of Hawai'i, American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI). **The United States must act now to ensure the prosperity of the U.S. Pacific Islands and protect national influences by strengthening its positions in international fisheries negotiations.** Specifically, to improve negotiations within the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), where 60% of the global tuna supply is managed.

Following another disappointing outcome for the United States at the WCPFC annual meeting in December 2021, the Council recommended implementing a holistic approach to advancing U.S. fishery interests in the Pacific. Rather than having negotiations related to the WCPFC be limited to specific federal agencies, this objective should be incorporated into a broader overarching goal

for the United States, including geopolitical interests such as improving trade, food security, national security and ultimately, strengthened U.S. influence in the Pacific. The Council developed an informational paper outlining these needs that was distributed to the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, the Interior and State. Thus far, responses have been supportive, with some commitments to prioritize fisheries through cooperating with Pacific Island nations.

The Council's requests are timely. The Biden Administration launched its *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*¹ in February and in March requested public comments for the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF). The Council requested that advancing fisheries be included as an objective in the IPEF. Two of the objectives of the



Longline vessels in port at Pier 38, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Commercial fisheries for pelagic species like tuna brought in \$124.4 million in 2021.

overarching *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* are to "drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific" and to "partner to build resilience in the Pacific Islands." For Pacific Island nations and territories, fisheries are often the leading (and often the only) resource for national and territorial economic development. Fisheries are to the Pacific Islands as fossil fuels are for the Middle East, in terms of relative economic significance.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

IN THIS ISSUE

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| 1 Council Proposes a New Pacific Strategy to Advance US Interests Through Fisheries | 9 'Aha Moku 'O Maui Members Facilitate Native Consultation on State and Federal Decisions | 15 New Outreach Resources |
| 3 Western Pacific Tuna - Complex and Delicious! | 10 Sustainable Fisheries Fund Working in the CNMI | 16 Council Family Updates |
| 4 190th Council Meeting Highlights - March 22-24, 2022 | 11 American Samoa Longline Diversification Project Update | 17 Hawai'i Fisherman Clayward Tam Chosen as Pacific Representative on NOAA Advisory Committee |
| 6 Who ARE We in the Western Pacific Region? | 12 Council Scholarship Recipient Joins Research Cruise to Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll | 17 In Memoriam: High Talking Chief Va'amua Henry Sesepasara |
| 7 WP Council—An Organizational Leader on Equity and Environmental Justice | 13 Congressional Corner | 18 Recipe: Pressed Spicy 'Ahi Sushi Squares |
| 8 Improving Survival of Oceanic Whitetip Sharks at Forefront of Hawai'i Fishing Industry's Attention | 14 Progress on President Biden Executive Orders—How Key Departments and Agencies are Building Momentum | 19 2022 Council Calendar |
| | | 20 Upcoming Events |



New Pacific Strategy

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

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STORY ICON KEY

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But in order to get these goals and objectives achieved, immediate improvements are needed and the groundwork must be laid out at the WCPFC. Specifically, fishing opportunities for Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries need to be enhanced, and the U.S. Pacific Territories need to have their economic aspirations acknowledged.

For American Samoa, tuna fisheries contribute to one third of the total workforce, mostly through a StarKist cannery, and 90% of exports. American Samoa is supplied mostly by U.S.-flagged purse seiners that call Pago Pago home. However, these vessels are not recognized within the WCPFC as a distinct fleet, which would afford them benefits as a Small Island Developing State and Participating Territory (SIDS/PT). The situation makes it difficult for them to compete internationally and jeopardizes the existence of a "local" American Samoa fleet to supply the cannery. This poses a threat to the economy of American Samoa.



Longline fishing vessels in Pago Pago Harbor, American Samoa.

The Hawai'i longline fishery is the largest food producer for the State and supplies more than 60% of fresh yellowfin and bigeye tuna to U.S. markets, and leads the nation in swordfish production. The fishery is the most regulated of its kind in the world and is considered the "gold standard" in compliance and monitoring. Yet no good deed goes unpunished. The Hawai'i fishery has the lowest catch limit for bigeye tuna of limits set for six countries by the WCPFC. Several "distant-water" fleets, mostly from Asia, have catch limits several times higher. While the Hawai'i-based U.S. longline fishery exceeds monitoring (human observer coverage) and reporting requirements, and does not transship catch at sea, many of these competing fisheries barely meet or fail to meet these requirements each year.



Albacore tuna are the primary target species for the American Samoa longline fishery. Photo: Flickr.

The international playing field must be level for the United States within WCPFC fisheries management, particularly to ensure American Samoa's rights as a SIDS/PT are respected and acknowledged. The Hawai'i-based U.S. longline fishery needs to have catch limits that are proportional to its fishing capacity and incentivize compliance and monitoring. The current status quo and trajectory of U.S. fisheries negotiations in the Pacific may lead Hawai'i and the U.S. Territories into a precarious economic situation and/or jeopardize their ability to sustain local food security.

This situation can only be corrected by increased engagement with other Pacific Island nations, many of which form voting blocs and alliances within the WCPFC. Although the United States is the largest sponsor of foreign aid in the Pacific, there is lack of direct engagement with these nations on fisheries matters. As a result, many of these nations do not support U.S. interventions and proposals, while sometimes favoring other competing nations. American Samoa, Guam, and the CNMI each have their own "seat at the table" along with the United States at WCPFC meetings and negotiations. The U.S. Pacific Territories, with adequate resources from the U.S. federal government, need to use shared commonalities and aspirations so that negotiations can be articulated with mutual cooperation with Pacific Island nations.

The greatest beneficiary of decreased U.S. engagement and influence is China. China is actively implementing a specific set of policies, programs and investments to expand its influence throughout the Pacific² specifically focusing on the fisheries sector. Such is the case in Kiribati, which is the closest foreign nation to Hawai'i, much closer than the continental United States. China has developed many infrastructure projects with

associated lending, including deep-water ports where there is a potential for military access. This influence began with fisheries partnerships, where Chinese tuna vessels would use Kiribati status and privileges as a SIDS/PT to gain fishing access with exemptions from conservation restrictions. Chinese fishing influence is believed to be the cause of Kiribati moving towards opening tuna-rich waters of the second largest marine protected area in the world (second to Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument), the Phoenix Island Protected Area, to tuna fishing.³ In the Solomon Islands, similar influences are emerging.

While the situation may seem grim, U.S. officials are beginning to prioritize improving relations in the Pacific through the new *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* and the IPEF. The Council's efforts are not going unnoticed either. It is becoming apparent to leadership in Washington D.C. that unless the United States strengthens its relationships in the

Pacific, it will be replaced by China. That would not only lead to degraded fishery ecosystems, but also weakened U.S. trade and food security for Hawai'i and the U.S. Pacific Territories. It's apparent that the only way to strengthen these relationships with Pacific Island nations is to increase the significance of U.S. fisheries in the global market, which begins at the WCPFC.

The Council and the Permanent Advisory Committee to U.S. Commissioners to the WCPFC will discuss the Pacific Strategy at its June 8 meeting. 🐟

¹ www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf

² www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/20/china-solomon-islands-security-deal-pacific-why-america-should-care

³ www.1news.co.nz/2021/11/11/fears-over-chinas-involvement-in-kiribatis-ditching-of-marine-reserve

Western Pacific Tuna - Complex and Delicious!



Hawai'i longline vessel heading out to sea. Photo: Joshua DeMello.

Do you ever wonder where the fish you buy comes from? The Filet-O-Fish you ordered from McDonald's? That is pollock caught in Alaska's fishery. The lobster you ordered at that fancy restaurant? Most likely from Maine's famous fishery. But what about in the Western Pacific? The answer is right there in your (poke) bowl.

Species managed under each of the eight regional fishery management councils vary and hold significant roles in the surrounding communities and cultures. For example, the Alaska pollock fishery in the North Pacific Region is the main species that allows Alaskan ports to hold the top three spots in the nation in terms of volume landed. The lobster fishery in the New England area provides that region with the most valuable commercial fishery in North America, with Maine setting a record of \$725 million for the landed value in 2021. Right here in the Western Pacific, our bread and butter is the tuna fishery—the only one in the United States.

Tuna, more commonly known by its Hawaiian name, 'ahi, can be found in poke bowls, sushi, and in plate lunches and

on white tablecloth dinner plates around the region and the world. Honolulu consistently ranks in the top 10 ports nationally by value of seafood landed annually as a result of the successes within the 'ahi fishery. The longline fishery based out of Hawai'i is one of the most regulated in the world and maintains high standards for crew safety and labor conditions. Globally, the value of the tuna fisheries in the Pacific exceeds \$26 billion for both fresh and frozen fish, as well as canned tuna.

Being a successful fresh-fish-fishery in the Western Pacific does come with the challenge that tunas are pelagic and part of a stock shared with countries from all over the world. This means it is important to manage these species on an international level to make sure that U.S. fisheries get their share of the pie. The region's closest neighbors compete for these resources making securing a piece of that pie much more difficult, especially when not all countries share the



Fresh bigeye tuna up for auction in Honolulu. Photo: Matthew Seeley.

same priorities of working towards sustainability. But despite competition for the resource, our tuna fishery remains sustainable and continues to provide fresh fish to Hawai'i and the world.

Next time you are out picking up seafood, pass on that Filet-O-Fish or Maine lobster and pick up a fresh loin of 'ahi or a pound of spicy 'ahi poke. Rest assured that the fish you are getting comes from our region's top fishery and one of the most well-managed in the world. Something to be proud of and share with your family. 🐟

