



WELCOMING REMARKS

WESTERN PACIFIC COUNCIL CHAIR TAOTASI ARCHIE SOLIAI

**COUNCIL COORDINATION COMMITTEE MEETING**

TELECONFERENCE CALL

May 27 - 28, 2020

Talofa, Aloha, Hafa Adai and Tirow. On behalf of myself and Vice Chairs Howard Dunham of American Samoa, Michael Duenas of Guam, John Gourley of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Ed Watamura of Hawai‘i and Executive Director Kitty M. Simonds of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, we are pleased to welcome you, the chairs, vice chairs and executive directors of our nation’s regional fishery management councils to the summer 2020 meeting of the Council Coordination Committee. We welcome also our distinguished guests, NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries Chris Oliver, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs Sam Rauch, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Operations Paul Doremus, Director of Scientific Programs and Chief Science Advisor Cisco Werner and other NOAA Fisheries members in attendance.

Let us open the meeting in the traditional Samoan way, with a prayer.

[Prayer in Samoan followed by summary in English.]

As Robert Burns, the great Scot poet, noted over two centuries ago: “The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men, / Go often askew.” And so our wonderful plans to meet with you this week at the lovely Turtle Bay Resort on Hawai‘i’s famous North Shore, to share with you the experience of visiting the nation’s only live, fresh tuna auction and to showcase the Western Pacific Council’s education and outreach initiatives will have to wait for another day.

Fortunately, however, we have technology and some IT savvy staff at the Council and NOAA Fisheries to enable us to meet virtually and even to have a social-distancing social hour at the end of the day. So let us count our blessings as we carry on with our responsibility to ensure that America’s fisheries are managed to the benefit of the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made our responsibility more poignant and highlights the often overlooked fact that managing our nation's fisheries is about ensuring that Americans have food. Yes, management is about making certain fish stocks and protected species remain healthy. Yes, management is about guaranteeing that our fishermen can earn a decent living, pursue the sport of recreational fishing and continue their cultural traditions. But the bottom line is the goal of management of our fisheries is to ensure that our nation can provide nutritious seafood to its people from its waters, which comprise the second largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the world. In the first paragraph of the Magnuson Act, the list of contributions that fishery resources provide to the Nation begins with "food supply"!

But this is not evident when one considers the responses by our government to the impacts of COVID-19 on the US fishing industry compared to its response to the impacts on the US agriculture industry. US fishermen in 2019 produced \$10.7 billion in revenue, and the Department of Commerce through Section 12005 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act is providing \$300 million to assist affected fishery participants. By comparison, America's farms generated \$132.8 billion in revenue for which the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is providing \$19 billion for COVID-19 relief. The USDA package includes \$16 billion in direct payments to producers and \$3 billion in commodity purchases for distribution through food banks and faith-based organizations. In addition, USDA has up to an additional \$873.3 million available in Section 32 funding to purchase a variety of agricultural products for distribution to food banks, and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act provided at least \$850 million for food bank administrative costs and USDA food purchases, of which a minimum of \$600 million will be designated for food purchases. Ten percent of the Section 32 purchases will be for fish.

Put simply, while both fisheries and agriculture feed our nation, the fisheries sector is receiving COVID-19 relief equal to about 3% of its revenue while the agriculture is receiving relief greater than 16% of its revenue.

Now that America has flattened the curve, our government should prepare for a second wave of the pandemic and the ongoing meat shortage due to COVID-19 related plant shutdowns and unlinking of the nation's food supply chain, which are predicted to last for months. In these

novel and desperate times, our government needs to act creatively. One action that could help our people get the protein they need is to lift draconian measures placed on our fishermen that have no proven conservation benefit. We could allow our fishermen to fish in the US EEZ waters that are now designated as monument, which includes 51% of the US EEZ in Western Pacific Region. We could also allow our fishermen to provide the continental United States with sustainably caught domestic marlin from well managed US Pacific Island fishermen.

The fish caught by America's fishing fleet can no longer be treated as if they were simply nonessential trade commodities, when in fact they are food for our people. This is something that we, the CCC and NOAA Fisheries, can and should address. I hope we are up to that task over the next two days.

Thank you, Fa'afetai, and welcome.