

MAFAC Presentation

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members. My name is Ed Ebisui and I am a member of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council. I am a lawyer by training and a fisherman by choice.

The council and I thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you matters concerning the recreational fishery in our region.

In terms of geography, our region includes the Exclusive Economic Zones surrounding Hawaii, the Territory of American Samoa, the Territory of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and US Pacific Island possessions. The combined area of these EEZs is about 1.5 million square miles.

As to the consumption of fish, the average per capita consumption in Micronesia and Polynesia is about 8 times the national average and in more culturally diverse Hawaii, the consumption rate is about 3 times the national average.

In our region, the lines of distinction between commercial and recreational fishing are, at best, blurred. Even within the so called “recreational” sector, there are many sub-categories, such as sustenance fishing, subsistence fishing, pure recreational fishing, part-time commercial fishing to defray fishing expenses (also called “expense fishermen”), and so forth.

The histories, cultures, traditions and social structures within the region are diverse and unlike any other region in the country. Indeed, in parts of the region, the practice of “catch and release” is not acceptable. Fish are caught to be kept for food and its distribution in the community is important to meet social obligations. Releasing fish would be considered a failure to meet these obligations in these communities.

These diversities and circumstances present unique challenges for fishery managers.

Recreational fishing continues to be an extremely important activity throughout the region. Presently, in Hawaii there are upwards of 12,000 pleasure craft registrations.

Annually, there are about 150 to 200 boat-based fishing tournaments annually, of which about 30 are considered major tournaments.

The best known, and the grandfather of all tournaments, is the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament, which began in 1958 and is held each year in Kailua-Kona on the Big Island.

Another tournament worth mentioning is the Ahi Fever Tournament, which began about 4 years ago and is held on the leeward-side of Oahu, at the Waianae Boat Harbor. The number of boats in this year's tournament was limited to 200 because part of the harbor was not available. In the past years, the number of entrants was capped at 260 boats. The tournament organizers have requested to increase the cap to 300 boats.

Elsewhere in the region, American Samoa, Guam and the CNMI also host off-shore fishing tournaments.

In terms of catch, the estimated recreational catch in Hawaii is about 13 million pounds of the estimated 38.3 million pounds of total catch, or about 1/3 of the total annual catch. 95% of the recreational catch was caught on boats. In Guam, it is estimated that the recreational catch is about 44% of the total annual catch.

We are aware that opposition to the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey (MRFSS). Apparently, use of the MRFSS data in certain forms of recreational fishing management regimes, especially with respect to recreational fishing quotas, was behind much of the dissatisfaction with the program. Although not perfect, the program offered us an opportunity to gather much needed basic data from the recreational sector in Hawaii.

In our region, the management of recreational fishing is handled, to a large extent, by the local governments. The management tools currently employed consist primarily of size limits, bag limits, seasonal closures and area closures, method and gear restrictions, and the like. Nowhere in the region is the reporting of recreational catch or effort mandated by the local governments.

In this regard, the intercept creel survey in Hawaii set up under MRFSS was the only means of acquiring information on the universe of recreational fishers, their effort and their catch. The program in Hawaii was well managed and staffed with qualified and good field personnel. The field personnel are well versed and personally participate in fishing. They know how to approach and converse with fishers to get accurate information from the fishers without being intrusive or causing suspicion or alarm in the fishers. In addition to getting information, by engaging the fishers in dialogue, the field personnel were effective in informing and educating recreational fishers about the need for information to better manage the fisheries.

Despite the flaws, shortcomings and inconsistencies cited by the program's critics, from our perspective, the program was far better than what we are now left with, which is simply, nothing. Although the program was not designed to be an adjunct of

any quota system, it does help us to better understand the extent, size, characteristics and effects of our recreational fishery, all of which is helpful, if not necessary, in considering future management measures.

In this regard, we ask that in your deliberations and recommendations on recreational fishing, the Committee consider and recommend that the funding for the MRFSS program in our region be restored.

Turning to the NOAA Recreational Fisheries Strategic Plan, in June of this year, Dr. Hogarth and Mike Kelly presented the plan in Hawaii. The meeting was very well attended by the public. The more common sentiments expressed were: 1) a marine recreational fishing license should not be required to fish public resources; 2) licensing appears to be a program to generate revenue, not to improve recreational fishing; and 3) if a licensing does become mandatory, the revenues must be directed to the science of the fishery, stock enhancement and other efforts at improving recreational fishing.

Similarly, in a recently conducted survey of subscribers to Hawaii Fishing News, a monthly sportfishing publication, respondents were about 11 to 2 against being required to submit a non-commercial fish catch report, and about 7 to 2 against being required to purchase a saltwater fishing license.

Several years ago, our council established its Recreational Data Collection Task Force. Distrust over the government's intentions and motivations was the greatest single obstacle to consensus for a plan to collect recreational fishing data.

A few years back, the State of Hawaii, through its Division of Aquatic Resources, tried to implement saltwater fishing licensing. Although the state has had a freshwater

licensing system for decades, its saltwater licensing efforts were met with public outcry and the legislature intervened by passing legislation limiting the administrative rule making process so that licensing can only be mandated by legislative act.

In Guam, recreational and subsistence fishing data are being collected by a third-party, the Guam Fishermen's Co-Op. Along with providing marketing opportunities to its members, the Co-Op provides fuel and ice to its members on a discounted basis. The Co-op is in the unique position of making the submission of catch and effort data a condition of membership.

Our council has long contemplated the involvement of an NGO (such as the Pacific Ocean Research Foundation, a private, non-profit association dedicated to the advancement of science associated with sport fishing) as the collection point and repository for recreational catch and effort data. Such an arrangement could significantly ease concerns over government's intentions and motivations and the fear of "Big Brother", as protections for individual confidentiality could be built into the system.

Under this arrangement, membership in the organization could constitute the license or permit to take or possess off-shore species. Any monies derived from membership could be earmarked for the administration of the data collection and the science of recreational fishing.

We think that this proposed arrangement has benefits for the recreational fishers, fishery managers and the government and is worthy of further discussion, deliberation and recommendation.

Our region is not unique in terms of the opposition, attitudes and concerns expressed by our respective publics when it comes to the management of fisheries, whether commercial or recreational. However, in addition to being a challenge, we also think that opportunities are being presented—an opportunity to place the responsibility for providing the necessary information on the shoulders of the user group and an opportunity to assure utilization of generated funds for the benefit of the fishery.

Recreational fishers in our region will soon be faced with resource allocation issues already faced in other regions. Specific to our circumstances, the recently established Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, of which the United States is a member, has already discussed capping of fishing effort to the November 1999 level. For the commercial sector, there already exists substantial quantities of data, mechanisms in place and advocates to argue its points. On the other hand, there is nothing comparable for the recreational sector.

In closing, our council has long recognized the need for recreational fishing data and we are pleased by the formation of your Recreational Fisheries Data Working Group. We ask that in your deliberations and recommendations relating to the agency's Recreational Fisheries Strategic Plan, due consideration be given to the merits of including non-governmental third-parties as collection points and repositories for recreational fishing data.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.