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## SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

### TWENTY-SIXTH REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES (Noumea, New Caledonia, 5 - 9 August 1996)

#### COUNTRY STATEMENT

#### NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

##### **Background**

The U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) has experienced rapid growth since it established political union with the United States of America in 1976. Rapid growth in tourism, the CNMI's leading industry, parallel with the present economic success is gradually changing the pace of commercial fisheries development as well as the local and federal government's perception of the need to develop this industry.

Japanese tourists, the majority of the Northern Marianas visitors (63% of the approximately 654,375 visitors that visited the Northern Marianas in 1995 are Japanese) are partly responsible for the gradual growth in this industry. The demand for seafood caused by the increasing influx of Japanese tourists, is opening a bright market for locally caught fishes.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources (DLNR), is the agency of the Northern Marianas Government mandated by law to protect, conserve, manage, and develop the fisheries and wildlife resources. The Fish and Game Regulations promulgated under the same law that created the DFW, was set up for the purpose of fulfilling these responsibilities. The division is presently involved projects aimed at meeting its goals through research/surveys, infrastructure developments, and other fisheries developments. This report covers only projects or activities carried out in the past five years (from 1990 - present).

## **Research/Surveys**

Baseline information is needed in order to wisely manage and develop our fisheries resources. Research and surveys are imperative for the establishment of baseline data.

The DFW is a recipient of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Dingle-Johnson (DJ) Sportfish Restoration Program, a federally funded program, right after the establishment of the Division. Currently, the division is handling five research programs and is also collecting five major fisheries data collections. A more detailed five-year research progress report (Fiscal Year 1991-1996) will be compiled and processed by the end of this fiscal year for submittal to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Offshore Creel Survey - to obtain information on the catch of species important to offshore fishery. This ongoing creel survey program will provide information for developing management strategies for regulating catch by certain gear types, if necessary, and prevent depletion of this important fishery.

Inshore Creel Survey - to obtain information on the catch and species important to the inshore fishery. This study will provide information for assessing catch and species composition over time and provide the means for detecting and avoiding over-fishing of this very important fishery.

Biological Analysis of the Nearshore Reef Fish Fishery - to analyze the impacts of reef fish harvest particularly commercial harvest, upon the reef fish community structure. This information will be used to check compliance with existing size restrictions, assess aptness of existing size restrictions relative to reproductive capacity of the species, and develop improved management strategies to promote long-term vitality of this important resource.

Shallow and Deepwater Bottomfish Research and Management - to determine current status of bottomfish stocks and develop management strategies for the conservation of these resources. This project will provide information for halting the decline in bottomfish landings and provide for development of management strategies to ensure stable population levels in the future.

Performance Assessment of Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs) - conduct surveys to estimate the level of use of FADs and fishing success associated with them. The project will provide information to assess the effectiveness of the FADs, improve construction, maintenance, and placement methods and/or locations, and enhance cost-effectiveness of this popular recreational fishing feature.

Technical Assistance - the division provides mitigation inputs to projects impacting the marine and coastal resources. Since the inception of the program, more than 500 projects, including several major hotels and golf resort developments, were reviewed and commented on.

Data collection - the creel sampling (Baseline data Collection) part of this program began in 1984 and runs to present. The objective of this study is to gather statistical information on local fishery production and to determine the effort involved in harvesting the fish resources in the CNMI

## **Infrastructure Development**

To cope with the increasing number of commercial and recreational fishermen and to improve accessibility to fishing grounds, the Division is forced to look for funding sources to improve inadequate infrastructures. Funding for the following infrastructure development projects are approved and the projects either are in the planning stages, ongoing, or accomplished:

Launching Ramps: accessibility to fishing grounds was greatly improved when five of these ramps were constructed in the CNMI.

Navigational Aids: three of our facilities are now equipped with navigational aids (marker buoys and lightings) that make navigating to and from launching ramps safe and navigational during night time.

Sheltered Mooring Docks: the completion of the Smiling Cove Marina has provided our island of Saipan with a 64-boat slip facility. This facility has been filled to capacity and we are currently constructing a new and slightly larger marina facility adjacent to our existing one. This new facility is undertaken by a private firm and is expected to be completed by early 1998.

New Office Building: a bid proposal for a 9,000 square foot office facility is being finalised for announcement and if everything goes well, construction should begin by September and completion by early 1997. We are presently located in the DLNR's office complex.

## **Fisheries Development**

Other projects aimed at developing the CNMI fishery are listed as follows:

Fish Aggregation Devices: in 1993 our division was supported in part by the Saltonstall-Kennedy Fishery Development and Research Program. Through this support, our division was able to deploy eight FADs in waters around Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. These FADs provided significant benefit as far as catch rate is concerned toward our commercial, subsistence and recreational fisherman.

Fish Weir: after more than twenty years of stagnation, fish weirs are again permitted in the Northern Marianas waters. Six sites have been designated and are all being issued under a bidding process. Each site is then issued to the highest bidder.

Bottomfish Assessment of the Northern Islands: this assessment is being undertaken by our Division to establish economic potential and parameters of this resource. Repeated fishing expedition to these islands (where bottom fishes are in abundance) have been conducted and additional trips have been scheduled to take place.

A South Pacific Commission master fisherman had conducted bottomfishing training in the past and had also provided a similar training for bottom longline. Our division is also set to restart its bottomfishing training to the other islands.

## **CNMI Challenger Vessel**

DLNR purchased a 65' vessel that was previously used for multiple days bottomfishing trip by a private firm. This vessel has twenty individual bunks, five crew bunks, two shower rooms, two restrooms, a galley, lounge, air conditioning, and most of today's electronic equipment. This vessel is certified to carry a total of forty passengers and contains a 2,000 gal. internal fuel tank. With this vessel, our division is now able to undertake additional fishery projects by allowing us to conduct work longer and farther away from Saipan.

## Other Fishery Development

Other fishery resources that have been explored and undertaken are as follow.

Deepwater Shrimp Fishery: Harvesting of *Heterocarpus laevigatus* in the CNMI began in May of 1994 and has continued intermittently. Two private firms are involved in this harvest and were operating in a small-scale commercial venture. Catch rate of this resource.

## Present Status of Fishery

The fishing industry in the Northern Marianas is slowly growing out of its infancy and continues to develop into the year 2000. Our industry may be described as *Artisanal* (small-scale commercial production/landed fish sold locally); *Subsistence* (landed fish for self-consumption with occasional sale of surplus catch); and *Part-Time Commercial* (fish part-time basis and sell catch locally). Charter boat fishery has gained huge popularity among local boat owners and cater fishing has also gained tremendous growth in its success with our visitors.

The number of full-time commercial, part-time, and charter boats are increasing each year. In 1993, there were 497 registered vessels, 596 in 1994 and in 1995 (December), the division recorded a total of 673. In the 1995 recording, 87 were full-time commercial fishing, 69 part-time, 33 charter fishing, 301 recreational/subsistence fishing, 144 no fishing, and six were not determined.

Fish landed by local fishermen are sold locally at fish markets or numerous hotels and restaurants on island. Exports of fish products have not been established in the CNMI yet, even though there has been a small-scale sea cucumber exporting operation in existence. Imports of fresh and/or frozen fish from neighbouring islands, however, are substantial. The largest fish markets on Saipan, import approximately 7,000 - 10,000 pounds of fish from the Republic of Belau and FSM per week.

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