

Disaster Relief Fund from the US compensates fishermen and funds priority projects in American Samoa

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In 2014, the United States Congress allocated USD 1 million to the Disaster Relief Fund to help revive American Samoa's bottomfish fishery, which collapsed after a tsunami in September 2009. Based on damage assessment reports conducted by American Samoa's Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR), the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (WPFMC), and the Pacific Islands Regional Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US Congress declared that a commercial fishery failure had, in fact, occurred with the territory's bottomfish fishery. NOAA released monies to DMWR, under director Dr Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, in order to provide shoreline fishery infrastructure, financial assistance, and job training for the affected fishery.

The American Samoa *alia* bottomfish fishery, which targets snappers and groupers, had been a productive and profitable fishery since 1988. Some *alia* boats also troll for skipjack tuna for bait. According to a WPFMC report, revenue from the fishery averaged about USD 134,000 per year in 2007 and 2008. For 2009 alone, the revenue generated from the fishery totalled USD 190,000. By

2010, revenue had sharply decreased to USD 42,000, suggesting a loss of 80%. Clearly, the tsunami had a large, negative impact on the fishery.

The WPFMC report also indicated that 17 *alia* bottomfish vessels, which accounted for 50% of the fleet, were damaged or destroyed. Of these vessels, 35% were



On 29 September 2009, a tsunami left a mix of damaged boats, broken trees, electric cables and other assorted debris in its wake (image: Telemal, Flickr).

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declared a total loss, 42% were declared in need of major repairs, and 23% sustained only minor damage. Lost income is difficult to quantify but were estimated to be around USD 200,000 (pers. comm., Chris Hawkins, WPFMC staff member).

The bottomfish fishery was declared a disaster following criteria defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act. The bottomfish fishery failure determination was the basis for the US Congressional disaster relief funding and for NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service to provide assistance to American Samoa's affected communities.

In an effort to identify specific projects that would help revive the affected fishery, DMWR conducted a survey among local *alia* boat owners and fishermen, and found that the top priorities were:

- direct compensation for damaged or lost *alia* vessels;
- building a new boat ramp in Malaloa to provide a convenient access point near the floating docks;
- building an *alia* boat maintenance, repair and fishermen training facility; and
- purchasing an ice machine.

In addition to these projects, the Disaster Relief Fund's other main objectives included purchasing fishing gear and other related supplies, and conducting training for fishermen on boat repair.

A coordinator has been hired to initiate projects outlined in the grant. To date, 13 *alia* boat owners have been compensated for their damaged or lost vessels for a total of USD 250,000. DMWR is collaborating with the Department of Public Works in the design of the boat ramp. Moreover, DMWR is also coordinating with NOAA Sustainable Fisheries, and is organizing documents for US Army Corp of Engineer permits to repair the Fagatogo floating docks. Land use permits and site plans for construction of the boat ramp and fishermen training facility have been submitted to the American Samoa Department of Commerce's Project Notification and Review System. Additionally, site visits for the two projects have been completed and DMWR is working on obtaining quotations for ice machines, air compressors, and other related supplies.

Dr Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, DMWR Director, has noted the large amount of paperwork and tedious permitting process involved in getting approval from federal and local regulatory agencies, but hopes that construction of the boat ramp, fishermen training facility, and repairs of the Fagatogo floating docks will take place in 2016.



*The tsunami carried this boat well away from the harbor
(image: US Navy 091001-F-3798Y-093).*