

NMSAS / RMNM management

Background: The marine environment surrounding American Samoa experienced many changes since the original 1986 Fagatele Bay NMS management plan (MP) was drafted, including several major coral bleaching events and a significant increase in non-point source pollution. The MP was under revision when Presidential Proclamation (PP) 8337 of January 6, 2009 created the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument (RMNM), consisting of 13,451 square miles of the land water of and around Rose Atoll. Language in the PP stated that “The Secretary of Commerce shall initiate the process to add the marine areas of the monument to Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary in accordance with the National Marine Sanctuaries Act...” The public scoping meetings required as part of the NMSA process revealed both support and opposition to an expanded NMS. Nine potential areas were eventually chosen for potential inclusion in the expanded NMS, based the scoping meetings, a request from the Secretary for Samoan Affairs, PP 8337, and a request from the Jennings family regarding Swain’s Island. The FBNMS SAC established a Site Selection Working Group. Using the NMSA to evaluate the ecological, cultural, and economic value of each proposed site as well as NOAA’s Biogeographic Assessment of the Samoan Archipelago, the WG eventually recommended six sites for inclusion in the expanded and renamed NMS of American Samoa (NMSAS).

Boundaries:

1. RMNM encompasses the lands and waters out to 50 nautical miles of and surrounding Rose Atoll. The monument includes Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (RANWR), which consists of the lagoon and the emergent land out to the Extreme Low Water mark on the outer reef. While the Rose Atoll reef is generally circular, the Monument boundaries are marked in a square with defined corner points.
2. The Muliāva unit of the NMSAS, which includes the marine waters surrounding Rose Atoll from the Extreme Low Water mark seaward, has the same outer boundaries as RAMNM except that it also includes Vailulu‘u Seamount, making it 13,508 square miles.

Management: PP 8337 says that DOI has “management responsibility for the monument, including Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (RANWR), in consultation with DOC, except that DOC, through NOAA, shall have the primary management responsibility regarding the management of the marine areas of the monument seaward of mean low water, with respect to fisher-related activities regulated pursuant to the MSFCMA and other applicable authorities.” The PP also says that DOC must consult with DOI in the development of any management plans/rules/regulations for the monument. The regulations include no-take, research and multipurpose areas that promote traditional practices and non-destructive uses that are compatible with natural and cultural resource protection.

The agencies have elected to implement this direction by establishing an Intergovernmental Governing Committee (IGC) consisting of a representative from each ONMS, NMFS, FWS, in

consultation with the American Samoan Government (ASG). The IGC meets quarterly, either in person or by phone, to discuss management issues and pursue a collaborative approach to management, research, and natural / cultural resource conservation of this unique place. Each agency (ONMS, NMFS, FWS) issues its own permits based on that agency's regulations and authorities. There is no joint permitting system, so theoretically, a single activity could require more than one permit. The agencies are finalizing a joint document that explains and summarizes the various permitting requirements and application processes.

The NMSAS Advisory Council advises only ONMS, however the IGC has held public forums in the past.

Additional Background

Rose Atoll Marine National Monument, Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa Muliāva Management Area: Rose Atoll is 150 miles east of Tutuila and it consists of 0.03 square mile of land and 2.5 square miles of lagoon surrounded by a narrow barrier reef. Recognizing its outstanding ecological values, Rose Atoll was established as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1973, and provided with additional protection as a Marine National Monument in 2009 by Presidential Proclamation 8337. In 2012 the sanctuary Muliāva management area that includes 13,508 square miles of marine waters was established as an overlay to the monument to bring increased protections, regulations, research, education and outreach capacity. In 2013, NOAA Fisheries enacted additional regulations that prohibit all fishing within 12 nautical miles of the atoll and establish a permitting procedure for non-commercial fishing outside 12 nm. This includes sustenance, traditional, indigenous, cultural and recreational fishing.

The Muliāva area encompasses a hydrothermal vent, Vailulu'u Seamount, that is a biological hotspot, providing habitat for an unusual group of organisms, ranging from microbial mats to polychaete worms (this area is located outside of the monument boundaries). Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is a hotspot for fish biomass, has a unique coral community and is an important refuge for giant clams that have been heavily exploited elsewhere in the Samoan archipelago. The number of reef fish species at Rose is estimated to be 272. The refuge also contains nesting grounds for the threatened green sea turtle that is likely a source population for many areas of the south Pacific. Satellite tagged turtles have been tracked to Fiji, French Polynesia, and the Independent State of Samoa. NOAA Fisheries estimates that this population may contain over 300 nesting females, making it a significant population within the region.

The main threats to the coral reef ecosystems of the sanctuary, monument and refuge areas are the increasing water temperatures and ocean acidification consequences of climate change. While these concerns are shared globally with all coral reefs, the recent scientific studies highlighting the higher thermal tolerance of corals in this area suggest these reefs will have higher integrity than other reef ecosystems.