

Pro-Fishing Industry Council Members Often Stay In Power For Years

The same industry backers are reappointed to Wespac for term after term while people who lean toward conservation are soon replaced.

BY [NATHAN EAGLE](#) / NOVEMBER 8, 2021

For the past several years, Matt Ramsey, the Hawaii program director of Conservation International and a lifelong recreational fisherman, has tried to get a seat on the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

The 16-member federal body, which has jurisdiction over 1.5 million square miles of ocean, has long faced criticism for favoring commercial fishing interests. Current and former chairs have championed the industry for decades despite calls from the environmental community to strike a better balance.

But not much has changed, in part because it's proven tough to secure a seat for those coming up from the conservation side.



A Civil Beat Investigation

This Civil Beat special report documents the political activism of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, a federal panel that sets fisheries policies that govern 1.5 million square miles of the Western Pacific Ocean. Federal law generally prohibits using taxpayer dollars to lobby on state and federal issues but Wespac has for decades pushed those rules to the limit, angering environmentalists and Native Hawaiians. Now, with climate change creating a new urgency, Congress may be about to crack down on Wespac.

Part 1: [Records show how Wespac has used its political power to influence state and federal policy for the benefit of the fishing industry.](#)

Part 2: [Council leaders spent heavily to set up a traditional Hawaiian system of resource management even though it infringed on state jurisdiction.](#)

Part 3: [Fighting for the interests of the commercial tuna fleet, Wespac has pressured presidents and orchestrated public opposition to marine monuments.](#)

Part 4: [Who is Kitty Simonds? A profile of the council's longtime executive director.](#)

Part 5: Wespac has long been controlled by fishing interests but this year was forced to accept a conservation-minded member.

Part 6: [A reporting trip to Alaska reveals major differences between Wespac and other regional councils.](#)

Part 7: [A major update of the Magnuson-Stevens Act under consideration by Congress would prohibit lobbying by Wespac.](#)

In 2018, Hawaii Gov. David Ige decided Ramsey's skillset and background would be good for the council. He nominated him as part of a diverse suite of four candidates when Hawaii's obligatory seat opened up that year. Ramsey didn't make the cut.

The Secretary of the Department of Commerce gets to pick. And in 2018, Wilbur Ross, the secretary under President Donald Trump, picked Edwin Watamura, a longtime advocate for Hawaii's recreational fishing community.

In 2019, Ige again put Ramsey's name forward along with three others — all environmentally mindful — for one of two open at-large seats. The at-large seats can be filled by anyone from Hawaii or the three U.S. Pacific territories that Wespac represents: Guam, American Samoa and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas.



Wespac members Manny Duenas, left, and Matt Ramsey, top right, were sworn in by NOAA Fisheries regional administrator Michael Tosatto in September.

Ramsey was passed over again. That time, Monique Genereux Amani of Guam and Howard Dunham of American Samoa were chosen instead. Dunham is a commercial alia fisherman who also runs a diving business that does salvage work. Amani is described in her nomination packet, submitted to federal officials by Guam's governor, as an award-winning spear fisher and advocate for the territory's fisheries and natural resources.

In 2020, two more at-large seats opened up. Ige nominated Ramsey and five others on a balanced slate representing commercial fishing and environmental interests. But again, he wasn't picked.

Instead, one seat went to McGrew Rice, a longtime Hawaii island charter boat captain, who wasn't even on Ige's list. His name was put forward by the governor of the Northern Mariana Islands although he doesn't live or fish in the territory.

The other seat was filled by Roger Dang, a Hawaii Longline Association director who owns a 15% stake in 19 longline vessels, Pacific Fishing & Supply, Petro Pacific, which supplies fuel to the commercial boats, and Fresh Island Fish, the state's largest wholesale fish distribution company.

But this year, things were different, including a new president and a new commerce secretary. The open seat was Hawaii's and had to be filled by someone who lives in the state. This time, Ige controlled the list of nominees.

He put only three names on the list — Ramsey and two others — all with strong conservation backgrounds. Shaelene Kamaka'ala and Solomon Kaho'ohalahala had both been nominated in the past but were never chosen either.

Ramsey finally made it. He began his three-year term this summer.

**“The shift in the type of nominees reflects my administration’s concerted effort to adapt to the profound changes we’re seeing in our oceans.”
— Gov. David Ige**

In a statement to Civil Beat, Ige acknowledged that the time has come for new perspectives and new voices on the fisheries council.

“The shift in the type of nominees reflects my administration’s concerted effort to adapt to the profound changes we’re seeing in our oceans related to climate change and unsustainable fishing practices,” he said.



Gov. David Ige says his last round of Wespac nominations all came from conservation backgrounds because the council needs members who can develop policies that adapt to climate change and unsustainable fishing practices.

Commercial fishing interests have controlled Wespac ever since the regional councils were created in 1976 under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Even when on paper the makeup of the 13 voting members is evenly split among commercial and recreational fishermen, as it generally has been, there's often unanimous support for policies that benefit the commercial industry, largely due to the council's leadership.

For decades, the council was chaired by the Hawaii longline industry's biggest players, including Sean Martin and Jim Cook, who own several vessels as well as a major fish and marine supply store, ice company and seafood restaurant. Each served three consecutive three-year terms, the maximum allowed under federal rules.



William Sword

Vice Chair, American Samoa

But the rules allow a member who has served three consecutive three-year terms to then come back after sitting out for a term. A number of Wespac members have done that, such as Manny Duenas and William Sword.

Wespac has only had a few members representing environmental interests and they are always heavily outnumbered. None has ever served three consecutive full terms, let alone then sat one out and returned to the council. So while many in the environmental community rejoiced at Ramsey's appointment, they worry his ability to shape policy is likely limited.

The council's makeup could soon change, however. Amendments to the MSA that are being discussed in Congress, would require mandatory seats for specific stakeholder groups, among other things. A bill introduced in August by U.S. Reps. Ed Case of Hawaii and Jared Huffman of California would also require regional representation, so the governor of CNMI would not have been able to nominate someone from Hawaii to serve on the council, for instance.

Of the 16 seats on the council, eight are nominated by the governors of Hawaii and the three territories. Four are designated for federal officials like the regional commander of the Coast Guard and the head of Pacific Islands office of the National Marine Fisheries Service. Four are reserved for state

and territorial officials, including the head of the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources and the director of the Guam Department of Agriculture.

Eric Kingma, executive director of the Hawaii Longline Association, said the current council composition is a good one, with some younger new members and some older returning members who understand the complex nature and history of fisheries management.

But the members most loyal to the commercial fishing industry and Wespac Executive Director Kitty Simonds, who has [held her leadership position since 1983](#), remain the council's longest serving members and dominate its five-member Executive and Budget Committee.

Returning To Power

The committee includes the [council's chair and four vice chairs](#), with one from each territory and Hawaii. Its members retain the most direct oversight of the budget beyond Simonds. And recently, they have started sending joint letters to weigh in on pending legislation and other matters that affect the council's interests.

The current council chair is Archie Soliai, who was an executive with the Starkist tuna cannery in American Samoa before joining the territorial governor's administration last year.

Soliai, the council's chair since 2018, was first appointed in 2016 and reappointed in 2019. He stepped down from the council in 2020 and joined the incoming American Samoa governor's administration as director of the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources, leaving his job of the past five years as government relations manager for the Starkist tuna cannery, the territory's principal employer. As long as he is the DMWR director, which has a designated seat on the council, he can continue serving on Wespac.



Manny Duenas, left, and his son Michael Duenas, right, have served almost 20 years collectively on the council.

Manny Duenas of Guam and William Sword of American Samoa — who were appointed to at-large seats — are two other longtime council members who returned again this year.

Sword, a recreational sport fisherman, local Republican Party chair and engineer who works for Pacific Energy SouthWest Pacific, is returning after a three-term, nine-year stint that ended in 2016.

Duenas, a former council chair and president of the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association — a nonprofit that buys fish from its roughly 200 members and processes them for retail sales — finished three straight terms in 2012. His son Michael Duenas, the co-op's general manager, served for the nine consecutive years in between.

Manny Duenas has often voiced his disdain for environmental groups and government actions he thinks might restrict residents' ability to put fish on their tables. During his last meeting as Wespac chair, he said it would be the fault of "some green revolution group" and the federal government if Pacific islanders are hurt by any restrictions that might be imposed to protect coral.

He and Sword did not respond to a request for an interview.

Another member of the council's executive committee, John Gourley, an environmental consultant in the Northern Marianas, has opposed marine reserves and recently cautioned his colleagues about pending federal legislation that could limit the power they have to dictate how millions of dollars in grants are spent.



Critics have lamented how Wespac prioritizes commercial fishing interests over recreational fishing and environmental concerns.

Simonds, Soliai, Duenas, Gourley, Sword and Dang wrote to Case and Huffman last month about the effects they see as a result of the proposed update to the MSA. Since it's about pending legislation, the council is required to limit its feedback to factual and technical information. In general, their comments resist the bulk of the proposed changes to improve transparency, accountability and more.



John Gourley

Vice Chair, CNMI

In the letter, Wespac's leadership team explains how the Case-Huffman bill's additional reporting and planning requirements to monitor fisheries performance and the effects of management measures in relation to climate change "could pose a significant challenge for the less developed, culturally based fisheries in the Western Pacific."

Council members who are forced out by term limits often are given a spot on Wespac's advisory panel. Michael Duenas, who just finished a nine-year stint and has been replaced by his father, Manny, was appointed at the September meeting to a seat on the council's advisory panel for Guam.

Family, Political Connections Run Deep

Wespac has a long history of getting and keeping family members involved in the council.

In 1976, when Wespac was created by the passage of the MSA, its vice chairs included Peter Reid, whose uncle was American Samoa's governor; Paul Bordallo, the brother of Guam's governor; and Frank Goto, who had been good friends with U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye since their time attending Washington Intermediate School in Honolulu.

Goto, who died in 2019, was an icon in the commercial fishing industry who's credited with attracting the fleet of longline vessels to Honolulu. He was the general manager of United Fishing Agency, which runs the country's largest fish auction at Pier 38 in Honolulu. It's where the longliners now land about \$100 million of fish a year, mostly bigeye tuna and swordfish for restaurants, fresh ahi sashimi plates and poke bowls.



Hawaii's longline fleet offloads fresh tuna and swordfish at Pier 38 in Honolulu where it's sold at a fish auction run by former Wespac members.

In 2018, American Samoa Gov. Lolo Moliga recommended his own brother, who also served in his administration, without disclosing their relationship in his nomination letter to NOAA. Fueva Moliga was described as a lifelong fisherman who owned three alia boats and was treasurer of the local fishermen's co-op.

Last year, CNMI Gov. Ralph Torres nominated his brother Jack without mentioning their relationship. The bio in the nomination packet described him as a lawyer and longtime fisherman from Saipan who enjoys trolling and bottomfishing. The submission letter came from Arnold Palacios, Torres' lieutenant governor, a former chair of Wespac.

Wespac regularly designates members who look out for the commercial interests of fishermen to represent the council before the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, the international body that determines tuna quotas for the region among other policies.



Michael Goto, of United Fishing Agency, comes from an iconic family in Hawaii's commercial fishing industry.

Dang, the Hawaii Longline Association director, is expected to fill Wespac's slot at the commission's next meeting in December. Before Dang, it was former Wespac member Michael Goto — Frank Goto's grandson — advocating for the right to catch more bigeye tuna.

Council members are often politically connected.

The council's first chair, the late Wadsworth Yee, was a Hawaii Republican state senator. He served four three-year terms and would likely have secured a fifth if not for a damning audit in the 1980s and a federal investigation into Wespac.



Roger Dang

Vice Chair, Hawaii

Even with the critical audit, then-Hawaii Gov. John Waihee still nominated Yee. But federal officials did not choose him, ending an 11-year run in 1987.

His replacement was Edwin Ebisui Jr., a Hawaii lawyer and fisherman who served more than 20 years on the council. He died in 2018 during his eighth year as chair. He had been a strong advocate against marine monuments and other restrictions to the commercial longline tuna industry.

“The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council lives with controversy; it is the nature of its mission,” Ebisui wrote in a 2007 column for the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. “The council interacts with community groups and diverse interests. Its allies and opponents are continuously shifting, depending on the issues before the council and the decisions it makes.”

‘Very, Very Lively Discussions’ Ahead

Environmental groups have long had a deep interest in Wespac and its actions. But conservationists generally are relegated to attending meetings or participating as spectators, not council members. They have found better traction to influence policy decision via lawsuits filed over the years.

Rick Gaffney, a sport fisher from the Big Island who strongly supports marine monuments, and Julie Leialoha, a recreational fisher who has long advocated for a more sustainable use of resources, had arduous journeys before finally

being appointed to Wespac. And neither served the max of three consecutive three-year terms that appointees representing the commercial fishing industry often do.



Rick Gaffney, who represented non-commercial fishing and environmental interests, served one term on Wespac.

Gaffney, who was on the council from 2005 to 2008, recalled frequently feeling outnumbered when it came to environmental issues. It was always clear the longline industry and those sympathetic to its interests called the shots, he said.

“I somehow managed to become a pariah from the start,” he said.

Leialoha, who served from 2013 to 2016, was inspired to serve on the council for the very reason that she perceived it as too heavily weighted toward the fishing industry, according to her application.

Despite his conservationist background, Ramsey says he is not a one-sided nominee.

“If someone were to look at my resume, they may assume that I am a conservationist. If someone were to meet me on the beach or walk through my house, they would undoubtedly assume that I am a fisherman. If I was asked with which one I most identify, I would say both,” Ramsey said in an article Wespac put out after he was appointed.

Ramsey, who previously worked as a NOAA fisheries extension agent, vowed to bring the concepts of balance and sustainability to the council while acknowledging that's easier said than done.

"I don't see conservation being directly opposed to the wise use of the resources," he told Civil Beat. "But I've always thought there needs to be a balance between protection and production."

"The messenger makes a lot of difference." — Matt Ramsey, Conservation International

Ramsey wants to open up the discussion more about the reality of fishing. He said that of course it is about taking fish out of the ocean but that too often the understanding stops there and people fail to see the connection between seafood, the economy and culture.

"The messenger makes a lot of difference," he said, adding that he is there to learn and wants fishermen to reach out to him.



New Wespac member Matt Ramsey wants the public to have a better understanding of fishing and its relationship to seafood, the economy and culture.

Moana Bjur, executive director of the Conservation Council for Hawaii, welcomed Ramsey's appointment.

"From my perspective the lack of environmental presence on Wespac has kept issues around conservation out of the narrative," she said. "It seems that most issues have to be brought to the table from outside of Wespac, which seems to be met with more of an annoyance than 'Hey, this is why we are here.'"

Observers say with better representation from the environmental community on the council, there might not be so many lawsuits. But that won't happen without either a change in the Magnuson-Stevens Act requiring it or the governors changing a decades-old practice of predominantly nominating members who are connected to the fishing industry.

Ige may have stacked the deck this time, thrusting someone like Ramsey onto the council, but the governor's term ends next year and with it any sense of who might be nominated in the future. And the territorial governors have not shown a similar shift in who they want on Wespac, demonstrating the same nepotistic tendencies as their predecessors going back to the 1970s.

Still, the addition of Ramey is being met with anticipation on all sides.

"I look forward to very, very lively discussions over the next three years," Wespac Executive Director Kitty Simonds said in September.