

Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM) August 2020
STATEMENT by Hon Lopao'o Natanielu Mu'a
Minister for Agriculture & Fisheries

Honourable Chair,
Honourable Prime Minister of Cook Islands
Honourable Ministers,
FFA Director General,
Distinguished Heads of CROP Agencies
Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

At the outset, Honourable Chairman, thank you for agreeing to again taking up your role as Chair of our meeting. I look forward with great anticipation and interest to the discussions that will transpire over this virtual Ministerial meeting, particularly as we have come to accept this as the new norm for conducting important regional and international dialogue and debate for us in the Pacific. Under your very able leadership and guidance Honourable Chair, we look forward to productive discussions and outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all in different ways, however our solidarity and trust in the Lord will continue to strengthen and protect us during these difficult times. On behalf of the Government of Samoa, I wish to convey our deepest sympathies and condolences to Members and delegates that have lost loved ones to this pandemic.

Honourable Chair,
I wish to commend the work and concerted efforts of the FFA Secretariat and our Members countries in ensuring necessary preparations and arrangements for this meeting. I wish also to acknowledge the vital support of the SPC, the Forum Secretariat and SPREP, as well as partner organisations the WCPFC and the Parties to Nauru Agreement Office in the work of the FFA and our membership. Under present circumstances, your continued support is all the more crucial in informing our consideration of and decisions on regional fisheries issues consistent with the terms of reference of our meeting and expectation of Leaders to ensure effective oversight across the multi-dimensional issues that impact our region's fisheries.

Honourable Chair,

I thank the FFA and SPC for their joint work in elevating recognition of the importance of aquaculture, coastal fisheries and oceanic fisheries in this Ministerial meeting.

The Pacific Ocean has provided our island communities our cultural and historical identity and attachment since time immemorial. There are roughly 30,000 islands scattered across the Pacific Ocean divided into Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) that are represented in our meeting today. Our Pacific Ocean contains the largest array of marine habitats and coastal biodiversities in the world and sustains the largest stocks of albacore, big eye, skipjack and yellowfin tuna. The marine habitat and ecosystems of this vast area provide the pelagic and coastal fisheries resources on which the people of the Pacific depend on for food security and continuing livelihoods.

As we face COVID 19, there are key areas of importance to Samoa that I believe should be given highest consideration at this meeting:

1. Coastal Fisheries

Over exploitation of coastal fisheries resources is probably the greatest challenge threatening island communities. The lucrative deals offered by foreign companies and the increasing operations of black markets in commodities such as sea cucumber is becoming a major concern as these sort of operations are widely spread across our region. As a region, we should be in a position to share intelligence and relevant information to remove all IUU activities from our coastal fisheries. As in most if not all Pacific island countries, community ownership is paramount in managing coastal fisheries therefore this RFMM should consider strengthening national community-based fisheries management programmes as well as working with development partners in resourcing national programmes.

Secondly, this meeting should decide on sharing revenues from the oceanic tuna fisheries to fund national coastal fisheries management and development programmes, scientific research and monitoring of important coastal fish stocks as well as national IUU operations for coastal fisheries.

Honourable Chair,

It is important for this meeting to consider actions and decisions that enhances the sustainable management of coastal fisheries through undertakings that reduces impacts on coastal ecosystems, and optimising production to meet local nutritional needs and contribute to economic development.

2. Aquaculture development

Aquaculture development had been in our region for over 30 years and apart from a handful of commodities generating revenue most have failed. With COVID19 and Climate Change presenting real threats to natural supplies of fish and shellfish, aquaculture development should be seriously looked at as alternative to the overexploited coastal fisheries resources.

3. Oceanic and Offshore Fisheries Resources

The oceanic tuna fisheries continues to be a critical player in the development of Samoa for economic purposes and wellbeing of our people. Indeed, it is becoming one of the main contributors to our economy not only as a foreign revenue earner, but continues to provide employment opportunities during these difficult times through transshipment at our ports and onshore services.

Honourable Chair,

These are trying times and it is critical that we assess our respective MCS capabilities including national VMS programmes, networking amongst members, data and information sharing, aerial and surface patrols and most importantly maintaining unity to achieve our fisheries goals. As Ministers, we remind ourselves of our vision of “driving regional cooperation to create and enable the maximum long term social and economic benefit from the sustainable use of our shared offshore fishery resources” and no better time for that to action than now.

4. Impacts of climate change on fisheries and people

COVID 19 adds to the dilemma we already face as small island developing States from threats and challenges as a result of collapsing fisheries due to increasing levels of fishing, environmental impacts and climate change. These challenges threaten our oceans and marine ecosystems, and importantly our survival if immediate ambitious climate action is not taken. The importance of fisheries to environmental resilience, economic growth, poverty alleviation and women empowerment cannot be understated. In this regard, we as a REGION should continue to advocate for ambitious climate

action given the impacts it has on fisheries and our people in this Blue Pacific continent.

5. Marine Pollution

I welcome ongoing work of the FFA and CROP agencies, in close collaboration with the Tuna Commission, PNA and partners in working with us to address the critical impacts of marine pollution and ecosystem issues on our fisheries. I note that these efforts include a regional mechanism to address oil spills as well as the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter 2018-2025 amongst others. I would urge closer CROP coordination in these work to reduce duplication of work and effort.

6. Other matters – Forum Leaders’ directives

I also note progress made and contribution of our countries and regional agencies in the development of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent including the review of progress in increasing the sustainable economic returns from fisheries. It is useful to remind ourselves of the importance of data analysis and data validation in our work, particularly as we consider economic impact assessments and social-economic impact assessments of COVID-19 on our economies, which will bring about the differential impact and the resulting responses on our fisheries.

Excellencies and Chair, I thank you for the opportunity to take the floor and I again wish all delegations a positive and successful meeting.

GOD BLESS & SOIFUA