



Ministry of Marine Resources

COOK ISLANDS

OFFSHORE FISHERIES POLICY

MINISTRY OF MARINE RESOURCES

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Preamble

The offshore fishery is broadly defined as those resources fished beyond territorial waters and in Cook Islands is mainly concerned with migratory species of tuna and billfish. The Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) is responsible for the sustainable management and best utilisation of this resource within its exclusive economic zone of 1.98 million square kilometres.

The MMR operates with limited resources in a climate of ever-increasing demands and obligations. The offshore fisheries sector across the Pacific region is an evolving and dynamic sector with an increasing focus on the rights of resource owners and the integration of fishing with onshore benefits.

This policy framework provides a summary of the MMR strategy for the ongoing development and sustainable management of the offshore fishery resources of Cook Islands. It provides a clear and transparent guide for sector development and management to ensure that optimal benefits accrue to all Cook Islanders.

It is not intended that this policy remain static. It will be subject to regular review in order to meet the changing dynamics of the sector.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to give effect to the key principles of:

- a. sustainable resource management through sound biological principles;
- b. optimal utilisation of fishery resources through sound economic principles;
- c. food security, by minimising the interaction with coastal fishers whilst ensuring that local market and public nutritional requirements are being met.
- d. exercising the national rights of Cook Islands as both a small island developing state and a large ocean island state in developing and managing offshore fisheries.

2. Objective

The objective of this policy is to link the development and management of the Off-shore Fisheries sector into clearly defined roles and responsibilities that will support transparency and best practices and lead to measurable outputs.

3. Policy support framework

The policy statement should be supported by:

- 3.1 Legislation: updated, clear and concise legislation and regulations
- 3.2 Management plans: for designated fisheries
- 3.3 International and national plans of action: to deter illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, as well as to deter harmful interactions with particular species as bycatch (turtles, birds, sharks, etc.).
- 3.4 International and regional obligations: full participation and compliance with obligations in relevant fora, including meeting regional and sub-regional treaty requirements and developing alignments with regional vested interests

- 3.5 Effective resourcing of the Ministry of Marine Resources: the Ministry's corporate plan and business plan need to reflect the true cost of doing business and ensure that budget allocation, staffing and equipment are sufficient to allow full implementation of work plans and associated reporting.

4. Policy elements

4.1 Functions

- (a) Effective monitoring control and surveillance: resources to be in place for the monitoring and compliance requirements of fishing vessels and processing operations, including information management systems, vessel monitoring systems, and monitoring of observers, inspections and logsheets;
- (b) Effective management of licensing processes: a performance-based licence management system that includes continuous monitoring and evaluation, and encourages best practices to be implemented;
- (c) Development, implementation and monitoring of existing and new fishery management plans: plans to be developed through consultative processes and information gathering, and be based on scientific evidence. Fisheries and associated activities to be managed in accordance with plan requirements;
- (d) International and regional fisheries obligations: ensure that international and regional obligations are met and that national interests are fully represented, including at international and regional meetings, with well-established briefing and reporting processes;
- (e) Flag and port state obligations: compliance with all relevant international instruments, ensuring that adequate reflection of these is provided for through domestic legislation;
- (f) Food safety competent authority: national competent authority established to ensure that seafood exports meet public health requirements and market accreditation (e.g. EU accreditation);
- (g) IUU Regulation compliance: systems for management of Cook Islands registered vessels to meet international regulation standards and compliance (e.g. EU IUU certification);

- (h) Marine reserves: technical and regulatory support to be provided for oceanic marine reserve processes;
- (i) Investment support: Offshore fisheries investment capacity to be established in MMR to enable government to promote joint venture arrangements in order to derive greater benefit to Cook Islanders and/or to protect national interests;
- (j) Government corporate processes: codes of conduct, administration policies, succession planning to be incorporated into governance structures.

4.2 Strategic development

- (a) Supporting fisheries hubs, onshore development and services: MMR will support initiatives for landing catches, onshore processing and providing services in selected locations.

- Rarotonga: to become the hub for onshore processing of super frozen, fresh, frozen and niche products. The port of Avatiu to provide suitable facilities for offloading and reprovisioning of vessels. Rarotonga International Airport to be an export route for airfreight. Rarotonga to become the centre of government services and business;
- Tongareva: the port of Penrhyn to be an additional harbour for reprovisioning fishing vessels and supervised trans-shipment, and Penrhyn airport to support logistical services and airfreight export;
- Pago Pago: establishment of an MMR office to service Cook Islands flagged vessels and vessels licensed to fish in Cook Islands waters. Functions will include observer programme operations, vessels inspections, food safety compliance and industry liaison.

- (b) Remove rebate and discount on fishing licenses: There is competitive demand for Cook Islands fishing licenses. Therefore, MMR will review the existing rebate on license fees for offloading into Rarotonga and the discount on license fees for vessels registered under the Cook Islands flag.
- (c) Offloading catches into Rarotonga to encourage economic benefits. The trend among coastal states is to integrate fishing licenses with onshore processing. MMR will encourage vessels to offload fifty per cent of their catches into Rarotonga, and will consider imposing a levy for catches that are not offloaded into Cook Islands ports or designated ports.

- (d) Dynamic licence review processes: MMR will provide licensing priority to owners and operators that commit to best fishing practices, the principles of the offshore fisheries policy, and bringing economic benefits to Cook Islands. A dynamic, merit-based performance evaluation system to prioritise new licences and licences due for renewal will be established using the criteria below as a guide:

Criteria for consideration of new licence or a licence renewal	Nauru	Licence renewal
Good standing of the vessel, owner, operator and captain	X	
Beneficial ownership by Cook Islanders	X	
The fishing vessel (modern, well equipped, comfortable and safe working conditions)	X	
Cooperating flag state	X	
Proportion of offloading into Cook Island ports		X
Contribution to the Cook Islands local economy		X
Compliance with MMR licensing conditions		X

- (e) Industry partnerships and joint ventures: MMR will support industry partnerships and possible joint ventures that offer wide leveraged benefits to Cook Islands, including market access, value-adding activities, increased levels of investment, and improved vessel management, services and logistics.
- (f) Artisanal and sports fishing: Ensure that interactions between offshore fisheries, artisanal and sports fishing are minimised through demarcated exclusion areas and, where appropriate, market controls.
- (g) Food security and import substitution: Ensure there is a consistent and affordable supply of quality fish for public consumption and the hospitality sector. Promote the benefits of fish protein as a healthy alternative to imported meat and processed products.
- (h) Resource allocation and fishery rights: Assert Cook Island rights as a coastal state to develop fishery access rights, including in the high seas areas. Pursue zone and flag-based resource allocations.
- (i) Purse seine fishery: Recognising that the existing purse seine fishery has not reached its full potential, MMR will develop and implement a fishery management plan appropriate to the potential of the fishery, assess the merits of the vessel day scheme of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, leverage benefits from the US Fisheries Treaty, examine options for bilateral arrangements and maximise the evolving revenue stream and associated benefits.

(j) Exploratory fisheries: Examine options for development of new fisheries through monitored exploratory fisheries. These include building on existing programmes to incorporate them into established fisheries:

- Bigeye tuna fishery: License vessels targeting bigeye tuna to fish in Cook Island waters and monitor the performance of these vessels with a view to establishing a declared fishery.
- Swordfish fishery: License vessels targeting swordfish to fish in Cook Island waters and monitor the performance of these vessels with a view to establishing a declared fishery.
- High seas fisheries: Monitor Cook Island registered vessels fishing in global high seas fisheries with a view to establishing catch history for future declared fisheries.

(k) Carrier and bunker vessel fisheries support: Investigate the opportunity for carrier and bunker vessels that operate in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) region to reflag to a Cook Islands registration and fishing licensing regime.

(l) High seas fisheries management: Ensure a proactive role in the development of sustainable management regimes for high seas fisheries, most particularly in high seas fisheries waters adjacent to the Cook Islands' EEZ, with a focus on the northern semi-enclosed area and the eastern high seas pocket. Concurrently, Cook Islands will work with other coastal states to reduce the fishing efforts of distant water fishing nations on the high seas so they fish only within national jurisdictions. This will emphasise the requirements under international law and the WCPFC convention for compatibility to apply.

(m) Membership of regional fisheries bodies: Securing, enhancing and protecting Cook Islands' strategic interests both in the domestic fishery and in high seas fisheries. Maintain or pursue Cook Islands' membership in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO), the South Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA), the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CAMMLR).



- (n) Modern MMR office accommodation, information management system (IMS), catch documentation scheme (CDS) and traceability: Considering the constraints faced by MMR as a small administrative unit with a large area of jurisdiction, MMR will seek a modern office on Rarotonga to efficiently rationalise and integrate its services, including operating a joint maritime surveillance operations centre. MMR will assist the Police Maritime Division to establish a northern base of operations out of Penrhyn port for monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) activities, and will develop an innovative IMS system, using emerging technology to support fishery monitoring and compliance capacity with real time access. This will also promote a competitive CDS and market access for Cook Island products and ensure product end-use traceability.

4.3 Investment proposal review and management

- (a) Promotion of a competitive market environment: Encourage long-term partnerships but avoid monopoly scenarios.
- (b) Well-defined strategies for the review of investment and business plans: Ensure investment proposals and strategies are reviewed in standardised and transparent processes.
- (c) Risk assessment: Use defined risk assessment and management processes in investment proposal analysis.

5. Policy processes

- a. Clear and transparent governance and internal processes: Policy implementation is supported by clearly defined and consultative processes.
- b. Whole of government engagement: Where appropriate, policy implementation is supported by cross-government consultation and engagement.

