

Pacific nations aim to resolve US default on USD 89 million tuna treaty

Source: Latest news column from FFA website: 21 January 2015 (<http://www.ffa.int/node/1619>)

Impacts and projections, revenues and losses are words that will feature heavily for the 17-member nations of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, FFA as they convene special sessions aimed at resolving the default and withdrawal notice by the US on a tuna treaty that has allowed US access to tuna fishing in the Pacific for almost three decades.

The US treaty, a unique tuna licensing access and development funding agreement between the US government and 17 Pacific nations, has been administered by the Forum Fisheries Agency since its inception almost 30 years ago.

Over the last few years a series of annual negotiations have locked in agreed payments for the coming 12 months. For 2016, that amount was agreed last August as USD 89 million – but in November the US advised that its fishing vessels would not be meeting the terms of that agreement, due on Jan 1 2016

“As treaty administrator, we’ve notified our Forum Fisheries members of the current situation and we look forward to following through on what regional positions can realistically be taken,” says the FFA’s acting Director-General, Wez Norris. “We have a clear directive and wish from the Pacific to resolve the issue, on terms that do not compromise their fisheries and economic objectives, or the spirit of a treaty which has delivered benefits for both the US and Pacific nations.”

Norris acknowledged the “high level of frustration from Pacific nations where budgets are being skewered by this news, especially as US and Pacific delegations held three specific formal negotiations in the last 12 months to reach a hard-won agreement achieved through compromise, effort, and good faith from all sides.”

“As the US Treaty Administrator, the secretariat recognises the impacts of this decision by the US on our members and remains committed to identifying available options and continued communication with the US to seek resolution,” says Norris.

“We now have two immediate priorities – to find a resolution for the 2016 impasse that will represent the best outcome for the Pacific; and to continue our work to restructure the Treaty. On the latter, we recognise the issues of inflexibility that the US is now grappling with, and Pacific countries have struggled with the exact same issues over the last few years.”

Pacific fisheries ministers were very clear in their desire to uphold the regional benefits and cooperation embodied within the treaty when they met in a special session in October last year, “and to start 2016 on this note was not something any of them wished for.”

During the third week of January, the agency circulated advice to members on the current default status of the treaty payment, along with a letter from the US Government advising of its intentions to withdraw. The US has apparently sent formal notification to Papua New Guinea as the treaty depository. Withdrawal would become final by January 2017.

Depending on how the Pacific Island nations and US move on restructuring the treaty, the notice of withdrawal can be revoked if a resolution to the current impasse can be reached.

Urgent regional meetings are being convened on the future role for the government-to-government Treaty, while also allowing for more flexible and direct commercial arrangements between vessel operators and the individual countries in whose waters they fish. Says Norris: “The US have indicated they remain open to this discussion so we will continue to progress towards mutually beneficial outcomes for 2017 and beyond.”