

Emergency “grab bags” save lives at sea

The successful rescue of three fishermen at sea in Tuvalu, after they set off the personal locator beacon from their emergency “grab bags”, demonstrates how a relatively simple gesture and small investment in proper equipment and training can save lives.¹

This was shared by Pacific Community’s (SPC) Director-General, Dr Colin Tukuitonga and European Union (EU) Head of Cooperation to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, Ioannis-Pavlos Evangelidis. The emergency grab bags were provided under the Development of Tuna Fisheries in the Pacific Project (DevFish2), an EU project which was implemented regionally by SPC and the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

This follows a recent report by the Government of Tuvalu² about how the two fishermen were able to utilise their emergency grab bag equipment and training to successfully signal for help after drifting several hours at sea.

Each bag is fully kitted with a personal locator beacon (PLB), strobe light, compact medical kit, a signalling mirror and whistle, a rescue laser and sea rescue streamer, a marine handheld VHF radio, a sea anchor, three manual inflatable lifejackets, a directional compass and two emergency thermal blankets (see picture).

The DevFish2 initiative has focused on assisting small-scale fisheries development in the Pacific in recognition of the significant role of the fisheries sector for local rural community livelihoods and sustenance.

In 2015, the project supplied 30 bags to Funafuti fishers, including the one used by the two fishermen, and conducted training on the proper use and maintenance of the equipment.

Following this initial distribution of bags, UNDP through the NAPA II project and the New Zealand government through a post-cyclone Pam recovery project supported the further distribution of 128 additional bags to Funafuti and outer island fishermen.

“Small-scale fisheries are a lifeline for many Pacific Island communities and it is vital that safety at sea is observed. With the committed support of the European Union and other donors, SPC has been able to meet the practical needs of fishers to safeguard lives and livelihoods,” Dr Tukuitonga said.

“The price of one fully equipped emergency bag is around USD 1,200 but its value is priceless in comparison with the cost of mobilising an air search and rescue and indeed in its ability to save a life which is what has been demonstrated here,” Dr Tukuitonga added.



The emergency grab bag (image: Jipé Le-Bars, SPC).

According to SPC Fisheries Development Adviser, Michel Blanc, “The facilitation role played by the Tuvalu Fisheries Department needs to be highlighted as they ensured a fair distribution of bags between islands and importantly provided training to the bag recipients on how to be safe at sea and efficiently use the grab bag items in case of an emergency.”

The emergency grab bag concept ensures that fishers and small craft operators have convenient access to basic sea safety equipment that is easy to carry and transport onto small vessels.

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¹ See a more detailed account of the rescue operations on page 20 of this issue.

² <http://www.tuvalufisheries.tv/2017/03/fishermen-adrift-for-15-hours-and-the-convenience-of-grab-bags/>