

Longlining for South Pacific albacore: The ship has sailed and the domestic industry is left to sink

Source: Press release from the Pacific Islands Tuna Industry Association (PITIA), 29/01/2014.

The ability of the domestic industry to compete in the southern longline albacore fishery has hit the point of no return. Tying-up vessels and sending employees home is now the reality that is faced by the Pacific Islands Tuna Industry Association members that have an interest in this fishery.

Scientists have warned for years that increased catches will come at the expense of economic viability.¹ The domestic industry has called for stronger management to mitigate the impact of the influx of subsidised vessels. The political force that subjects our Pacific Islands governments to other considerations have prevailed and the economic downfall of an industry of some 30 years is the result.

Stock assessments continue to produce relatively healthy results; however, actual experience at sea tells otherwise. Recent trends have shown not just decrease in catch per unit effort (CPUE) but fish size. Practice shows that there has been fast local depletion regardless of the perceived overall state of the stock.

Do we only step up to manage when overfishing is already occurring?

American Samoa with the support of the richer more powerful United States has recently put its fleet on the market. More than 50% of the Fijian fleet has been tied up. Tonga has one domestic vessel left — down from a high of 26. Similar stories come from Samoa and the once vibrant PNG domestic longline fishery is history long since gone.

The delegate from China announced at the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) 10, in December 2013, their intention to cap its fleet in the region at 400 vessels. That is an estimate of 150 more highly efficient and heavily subsidised vessels in a fishery where those of domestic flags are tied up and crew is sent home to seek alternative income earnings. Even those subsidised vessels join the growing fleet of tied up vessels, which dominate the scene in Suva harbour today.

Yet Pacific Island countries will consider issuing further licenses? Something is fundamentally wrong with that scenario.

As Dr Aqorau, of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), told ABC in a recent interview, “the albacore crisis is in the hands of the Southern states”. PITIA has many times in the past urged relevant governments to take control of the fishery. Ultimate control does lie with the Pacific Islands countries given that some 70% of the albacore catch is taken within their exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

So presumably, the income from licenses will compensate for a domestic industry that has collapsed? Has this theory been properly appraised? Or is this the short-term gain outweighing long-term rational and sustainable development?

A couple of governments have now stepped up to react. Whilst this is a step forward, we believe “the ship has sailed”. With the correct approach, government support could possibly result in protecting future investment but current stakeholders would not be so fortunate.

PITIA has always advocated managing the fishery. The reality is that the subsidised Chinese vessel is the only party operating at maximum economic yield (MEY) in this fishery, not the licensing authority and definitely not the unsubsidised domestic vessel, nor the fisherman that is now seeking employment.

It is paradoxical that a once profitable economic domestic fishery existed before the establishment of the WCPFC. Despite two conservation and management measures (in 2003 and 2005), designed to curtail increased fishing capacity, the heavily subsidised fleet has grown exponentially.

It is a sad indictment of “fisheries management” if ever there was one.

¹ See also article on page 9 of this issue of SPC Fisheries Newsletter.