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ANNUAL REPORT TO THE COMMISSION PART 1: INFORMATION ON FISHERIES, RESEARCH AND STATISTICS

WCPFC-SC21-AR/CCM-04 8 July 2025

COOK ISLANDS



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Scientific data was provided to the Commission in accordance with the decision relating to the provision of scientific data to the Commission by 30 April 2025

YES

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COOK ISLANDS



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1.Summary

In 2024, the Cook Islands' national fishing fleet consisted of two longline vessels, three bunker vessels, and two purse seine vessels, all operating in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention Area (WCPFC-CA). Most of these vessels operated south of the equator.

The fishing effort of the national longline fleet, measured by the number of hooks used, saw a significant decline, dropping from 4.5 million hooks in 2022 to nearly 1 million in 2023 and just over 780,000 hooks in 2024. This represents a 24% decrease compared to 2023. Consequently, the total catch of primary species also declined, reaching 172 metric tons (mt) in 2024, which is a 45% reduction from the 274 mt caught in 2023.

Within the Convention Area, the longline fleet's primary catch was albacore, which accounted for 59% (104 mt) of the total longline catch. Yellowfin tuna contributed 15% (26 mt), while bigeye tuna made up 6% (10 mt). The remaining 20% (35 mt) consisted of bycatch. Notably, no vessels in the fleet targeted marlin or swordfish; catches of these species were considered bycatch. Among the billfish captured as bycatch, blue marlin was the most prevalent at 14 mt, followed by striped marlin at 9 mt and swordfish at 2 mt.

Artisanal fishers in the Cook Islands reported a catch of 95 mt in 2024, which spanned across 11 of the 12 inhabited islands. Yellowfin tuna was the dominant species, making up 55% of the artisanal catch, followed by wahoo at 12%. The remaining 33% included flying fish, blue marlin, and various reef fish. The artisanal fishery predominantly utilized trolling and hand lining techniques. Catch and effort data for the artisanal fishery are based on nominal catches from January to December 2024 due to the isolation of many landing sites and a lack of fisheries officers to monitor these areas.

The Cook Islands' purse seine national fleet comprised two vessels, while 81 foreign-flagged vessels were authorized to fish and conduct service activities in the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This foreign fleet included 42 longline vessels, 30 purse seine vessels, and 9 bunker vessels. In 2024, the total catch of the national purse seine fleet in the WCPFC-CA was 5,767 mt, marking a 84% increase from the 3,127 mt caught in 2023.

The primary species caught by the national purse seine fleet included skipjack tuna (5,135 mt), bigeye tuna (387 mt), and yellowfin tuna (225 mt). In comparison, licensed foreign vessels operating within the Cook Islands EEZ recorded a total catch of 5,325 mt, which represented a slight 7% decrease from the 2023 catch levels of 5,730 mt. The major catch for the foreign fleet was also dominated by skipjack tuna (5,113 mt), followed by yellowfin tuna (145 mt) and bigeye tuna (63 mt). Overall, while the national purse seine fleet experienced significant growth, the foreign purse seine fleet showed a minor decrease in catch for the year 2024.

2. Background

The fishing history of the Cook Islands in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention Area (WCPFC-CA) reflects a significant evolution in both commercial practices and regulatory frameworks. Historically, Avatiu Harbour, the main harbour on Rarotonga, served as a crucial unloading point for commercial fishing boats, facilitating the distribution of fresh seafood.

In recent years, the Cook Islands has made strides in developing its national fishing fleet, particularly with the licensing of its first Cook Islands purse seiner in 2019. This marked a pivotal step towards increasing local participation in the fishing industry, complementing existing bilateral agreements with the European Union, which include sectoral support among other benefits.

By 2024, the Cook Islands had established a national fishing fleet that consisted of both longline and purse seine vessels, primarily targeting tuna and related species. Additionally, an artisanal fishery operated across all twelve inhabited islands, underscoring the importance of fishing to local communities. To better manage the extensive pelagic longline fishery, the Marine Resources Regulation introduced a Quota Management System (QMS) in December 2016, enhancing sustainability and ensuring responsible fishing practices.

Longline fishing activities are predominantly concentrated in the northern regions of the Cook Islands, specifically north of 15 degrees south latitude. Cook Islands vessels have extended operations beyond national jurisdiction, participating in fishing activities within the Convention Area. Historically, most purse seine fishing in the Cook Islands EEZ was conducted by U.S. Treaty vessels. However, since 2015, interest from foreign fleets has increased due to new bilateral agreements, leading to a more diverse fishing environment. By 2024, the Cook Islands had two purse seine vessels actively fishing in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO).

The primary target for Cook Islands-flagged longline vessels is albacore tuna, while skipjack tuna is the main target for purse seine vessels operating in the Convention Area. In addition to these commercial operations, there is a locally operated fresh fish longline vessel based in Rarotonga, which primarily targets tuna and billfish for the local market. This smaller vessel, under 80 Gross Registered Tonnage (GRT), operates within a range of 50 to 100 nautical miles from Rarotonga. Some Cook Islands-flagged vessels also operate out of foreign ports such as Suva, Apia, and Pago Pago, further integrating the Cook Islands into the regional fishing industry.

3. Flag State Reporting

The Cook Islands serves as a key flag state for longline, purse seine, and bunker vessels operating under the WCPFC. With its strategic location in rich fishing waters, the Cook Islands are committed to sustainable fisheries management and the conservation of marine resources.

Annual catch estimates for the national purse seine fleet

Area	Gear	Effort	ALB	BET	YFT	SKJ	PBF	BLM	BUM	MLS	SWO	TOTAL
CK EEZ	LL	768,735	104	10	26	7	0	0	14	9	2	172
Beyond CK EEZ	LL	16,400	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2

Table 1: Annual catch (mt) and effort (Hundred hooks/Fishing days) estimate for Cook Islands the longline national fleet, by primary species within and beyond national jurisdiction in 2024

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the annual catch (in metric tons) and fishing effort (measured in hundreds of hooks) for the Cook Islands longline national fleet in 2024. The data is categorized by primary species, such as albacore (ALB), bigeye tuna (BET), and others, showing catches both within and beyond national jurisdiction. The total catch within jurisdiction is 172 mt with 768,735 hundred hooks, while beyond jurisdiction the catch is 2 mt with 16,400 hundred hooks. Notable species within jurisdiction include albacore with 104 mt.

Annual catch estimates for the national longline fleet

Area	Gear	Effort	ALB	BET	YFT	SKJ	PBF	BLM	BUM	MLS	SWO	TOTAL
CK EEZ	PS	17	0	2	16	137	0	0	0	0	0	155
Beyond CK EEZ	PS	322	0	385	209	4998	0	0	0	0	0	5592

Table 2: Annual catch (mt) and effort (Hundred hooks/Fishing days) estimate for the Cook Islands purse seine national fleet, by primary species within and beyond national jurisdiction in 2024

Table 2 outlines the annual catch (in metric tons) and fishing effort (in fishing days) for the Cook Islands purse seine national fleet in 2024, segregated by primary species within and beyond national jurisdiction. The total catch within jurisdiction is 155 mt over 17 fishing days, while beyond jurisdiction it amounts to 5,592 mt with 322 fishing days. Skipjack tuna is a prominent species within jurisdiction, accounting for 137 mt and beyond jurisdiction 4,998 mts, highlighting its significance to the fleet's operations.

Historical annual catch estimates for the national purse seine fleet



Figure 1: Historical total annual catch (mt) estimates for the Cook Islands national purse seine fleet within the WCPFC Convention Area, 2020–2024

Figure 2 illustrates the historical total annual catch (in metric tons) and effort (measured in days) for the Cook Islands national purse seine fleet within the WCPF Convention Area from 2020 to 2024. The graph shows a steady increase in total catches, especially from 2023-2024 where total catch remained its highest at 5,730 mt, indicating growth in fishing success. In contrast, the effort remains more stable, with a moderate increase from 2020 to 2022, followed by slight variations in the following years. While fishing activity has grown, efforts to enhance efficiency are likely in play. Overall, the positive correlation between increased effort and total catches highlights advancements in fishing strategies contributing to heightened productivity within sustainable limits.



Historical annual catch estimates for the national longline fleet

Figure 2: Historical total annual catch (mt) estimates for the Cook Islands national longline fleet within the WCPFC Convention Area. 2020–2024

Figure 2 shows the historical total annual catch (in metric tons) and fishing effort (in hundreds of hooks) for the Cook Islands national longline fleet within the WCPF Convention Area from 2020 to 2024. The graph shows a noticeable decline in total catch over these years leaving a small catch of 175mt in 2024. This suggests reduced fish availability or changes in fishing conditions as well as the decrease in the number of flagged Cook Islands vessels. Correspondingly, the number of hooks used also decreases, indicating a reduction in fishing effort. This trend might reflect adjustments in fishing strategies or regulations aimed at sustainability.



Historical annual vessel numbers for the national fleet

Figure 3: Historical annual vessel numbers for the Cook Islands fleet, by gear, for the WCPFC Convention Area

	0-50 G	RT	51-20	0 GRT	201-5	500 GRT	500 +	GRT		
Year	LL	Artisanal	LL	PS	LL	PS	LL	PS	Bunker	Total
2020	-	171	13	-	1	-	-	1	9	195
2021	-	188	12	-	1	-	-	1	7	209
2022	-	216	5	-	1	-	-	1	5	228
2023	-	201	2	-	1	-	-	2	4	210
2024	-	202	2	-	-	-	-	2	2	208

Number of active vessels by gear and size category over recent years

Table 3: Number of Cook Islands vessels, by gear and size category, active in the WCPFCConvention Area, over 2020-2024

Distribution of catches of target species for different national fisheries



Figure 4: Map showing the distribution of target species catch (mt) for the Cook Islands purse seine fisherv.



Figure 5: Map showing the distribution of target species catch (mt) for the Cook Islands

Captures of species of special interest (SSIs)

The Cook Islands is committed to marine conservation, particularly regarding species of special interest (SSI) such as sharks, which are vital to the health of ocean ecosystems. Recognizing the importance of these species, the Cook Islands has established a comprehensive shark sanctuary, designating 100% of its EEZ as a no-shark fishing zone. This proactive approach is reflected in legislation and licensing conditions, ensuring that fishing activities within its waters strictly adhere to Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs) aimed at protecting marine biodiversity. There were no observed interaction of SSIs on the longline fleet.

Observed catches of SSIs by the purse seine fleet

Year	Category	Species	Alive	Dead	Unknown	Total
2024	Birds	Black Footed Albatross	0	0	10	10
	Marine Reptiles	Olive Ridley Turtle	1	0	0	1

Table 6: Observed annual estimated catches of species of special interest (seabird, turtle and marine mammals) by the Cook Islands purse seine fleet, in the WCPFC Convention Area

Annual catch estimates for non-target, associated and dependent species for the national purse seine fleet

Species	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rainbow Runner	0.02	0	0	0	5
Yellowtail Amberjack	0	0	0	0	1
Blue Marlin	0	0	0	0	0.53
Wahoo	0.07	0.24	0.1	0	0

Table 7: Annual estimated catches of non-target, associated and dependent species, including sharks, by the Cook Islands purse seine fleet, in the WCPFC Convention Area from 2020 - 2024

Annual catch estimates for non-target, associated and dependent species for the national longline fleet

Species	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Black Marlin	21.39	9.5	5.52	1.89	0.41
Blue Marlin	47.84	38.56	40.69	4.56	13.7
Common Dolphinfish	15.12	4.02	2.88	1.58	3.7
Great barracuda	2.63	1.16	0.1	0	0
Indo-Pacific Sailfish	2.13	0.45	0.05	0.06	0.28
Oilfish	18.05	3.87	2	1.15	0
Opah	3.12	2.72	0.91	0.13	0.29
Sharptail Mola	0.02	0.06			
Shortbill Spearfish	13.29	3.73	2.58	2.72	4.3
Sickle Pomfret	0.8	0.71	0.04	0	0
Striped Marlin	10.53	8.89	5.07	5.52	8.85
Sunfish	6.23	3.04	0.11	3.57	
Swordfish	20.28	8.04	9.4	2.3	2.22
Wahoo	44.42	20.56	8.44	3.64	4.2

 Table 8: Annual estimated catches of non-target, associated and dependent species, including sharks, by the Cook Islands longline fleet, in the WCPFC Convention Area from 2020 - 2024

4. Coastal State Reporting

Foreign-flagged longline vessels operating within the Cook Islands' EEZ had a significant impact on the total catch. As detailed in Table 6, these vessels were responsible for a total catch of 8,252 mt, representing approximately 97% of the total longline catch within the zone. The fleet composition included 62% Chinese-flagged vessels, 35% Federated States of Micronesiaflagged vessels, 1% Kiribati-flagged vessel and western Samoa.

In terms of species composition for the longline fishery, albacore dominated the catch, making up 60% of the total, followed by yellowfin tuna at 20%.

Turning to the Cook Islands' purse seine fishery, restrictions were implemented to limit fishing effort to 1,250 days within any consecutive four-quarter period. The majority of the purse seine catch, about 31%, was captured by the US fleet, followed by 26% by Kiribati, 23% by Spain, 9% by Vanuatu, 6% by Korea, 2% by Tuvalu and 1% by Ecuador. Foreign-flagged purse seine vessels achieved a total catch of 5,170 mt. Skipjack tuna was the most captured species, accounting for 96% of the total catch, followed by yellowfin tuna at 3% and bigeye tuna at 1%.

Overall, foreign-flagged vessels had a significant presence in both longline and purse seine fisheries within the Cook Islands' EEZ, substantially contributing to the total catch.







Figure 9: 2024 Foreign Purse Seine fleet catch composition in CK EEZ Figure 10: 2024 Foreign Purse Seine catch composition in CK EEZ by flag

5. Socio-economic factors

Several socioeconomic factors influence the trends in the Cook Islands' coastal state reporting on foreign-flagged fisheries. The nation's economic dependence on fishing highlights the need for sustainability, as foreign fleets significantly contribute to total catches, providing local employment opportunities in related services. Regulatory frameworks, such as restrictions on purse seine fishing efforts, impact the viability of both local and foreign operations. Additionally, the composition of the fishing fleet affects international relations, and market demand for species like albacore and skipjack tuna can shift catches. Lastly, sustainability initiatives, including no-shark fishing zones, guide the practices of foreign vessels, ultimately shaping the balance between economic growth and marine conservation.

6. Onshore developments

Onshore developments in the Cook Islands have faced challenges, particularly regarding the establishment of processing facilities, as past trials have shown limitations in infrastructure and resources needed for sustainable operations. Despite these obstacles, there remains a strong commitment to enhancing the region's maritime capabilities, particularly with aspirations to transform Penrhyn, a northern island, into a potential hotspot for transshipment, refueling, and unloading operations for fishing vessels. This initiative aims to leverage the location of Penrhyn to facilitate regional fishing activities and improve local economic outcomes while positioning the Cook Islands as a key player in the Pacific fishing industry. By investing in necessary infrastructure and supporting services, the Cook Islands hope to create a thriving maritime hub that can benefit both local communities and foreign fishing fleets.

7. Future Prospects of the fishery

In 2019, the Cook Islands' MMR began trials to integrate the 'HiFish' electronic reporting application with the TUFMAN2 database to streamline catch and effort data collection from longline vessels. This initiative aimed to enhance data management alongside the existing 'Onboard' app from SPC. Despite some technical issues identified during trials, ongoing collaboration with SPC-OFP and vessel operators has been focused on resolving these problems. MMR has recognized the benefits of electronic reporting, including improved data efficiency, and plans to extend the Onboard app's implementation to all longline vessels in the Cook Islands' EEZ. Additionally, MMR has partnered with other South Pacific nations to build capacity in electronic reporting, achieving nearly 100% coverage for the national longline fleet by 2024. For artisanal fisheries, the introduction of the SPC 'Tails' application in 2017 has significantly increased data coverage, enabling direct entry of catch data into databases, even in areas with limited internet connectivity, effectively addressing the challenges of geographic isolation.

8. Status of tuna fishery data collection systems

a. Log sheet data collection and verification

In 2024, the Cook Islands successfully achieved 100% logsheet coverage for its commercial longline fleet, primarily through postal submissions of original logsheets and some electronic submissions via email. This effort also included the collection of unloading forms from foreign-flagged vessels, paving the way for 100% electronic reporting (ER) by 2024. To facilitate this transition, MMR implemented the 'on-board' application to shift from physical or scanned logsheets to a fully electronic system, aligning WCPFC reporting standards and ensuring compatibility with the TUFMAN 2 database. MMR emphasizes engagement with the fishing industry through annual consultations to gather feedback and better address stakeholder needs. For locally based vessels with shorter trips, MMR can provide regular updates on ER implementation but longer trips from Pago Pago challenge timely feedback. To address this, MMR will trial the newly developed OLLO observer data application on the domestic fleet to capture vital information while at sea. Overall, MMR's initiatives aim to enhance data management and reporting capabilities in the fishing sector.

b. Observer Program

In 2024, the Cook Islands National Observer Program faced significant challenges due to a shortage of active observers, retaining only five observers. To remedy this, MMR contracted observers from other Pacific Islands programs, resulting in a notable increase in observer data coverage to 33.3%, up from 2.5% in the previous years. The Cook Islands is committed to ensuring that all observer data undergoes debriefing by a certified Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer (PIRFO) before submission to the SPC, which is essential for data accuracy.

Additionally, observers were strategically deployed on Chinese-flagged longline vessels, enhancing regional data collection and collaborative fisheries management. Overall, the Cook Islands' 2024 efforts demonstrate resilience and a focus on strengthening their observer program through targeted training and regional partnerships, aiming for sustainable marine resource management and adherence to international standards.

Year	Operational Catch & Effort	Port Sampling	Unloading	Observer Data (Trip coverage)
2020	100%	6.9%	57.89%	0%
2021	100%	18.3%	56.76%	3.4%
2022	100%	6.4%	32.14%	2.5%
2023	100%	1.2%	0%	44.4%
2024	100%	31.3%	0%	33.3%

Table 8: Estimated annual coverage of operational catch and effort, port sampling, unloading and observer data for the National Fleet, active in the WCPF Convention area for 2020 - 2024

c. Port Sampling Program

In 2024, most port sampling in the Cook Islands occurred in Rarotonga, focusing on locally based fresh fish longliners with an average catch of 2-3 mt per trip. Despite efforts to expand coverage, overall sampling from the domestic fleet reached only 31.3%. Port sampling is essential for gathering data on catch composition, fishing effort, and sustainability.

To improve coverage, MMR plans to increase participation from domestic vessels through outreach, education campaigns, incentives, and streamlined sampling procedures. Enhancing port sampling is vital for effective fisheries management, enabling MMR to make informed decisions that promote the long-term sustainability of fish stocks and support the livelihoods of those in the fisheries sector.

9. Research Activities

In 2024, while there was no major research initiatives conducted in the Cook Islands, MMR actively participated in the SPC bio-sampling and genetics sampling program. This program involved sampling tuna as part of the observer program initiatives, with fisheries officers collaborating alongside contracted Cook Islands observers. This partnership aims to enhance understanding of tuna populations and support sustainable fisheries management through genetic analysis, contributing valuable data for regional conservation efforts.

10. Addendum



ADDENDUM TO ANNUAL REPORT PART 1

8 April 2024¹

<u>SECTION A:</u> SPECIFIC INFORMATION TO BE PROVIDED IN ANNUAL REPORT PART 1 AS REQUIRED BY CMMS AND OTHER DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSION.

<u>CMM 2009-</u> 03	The Coo	k Islands ha	d one vess	sel fish a to	otal of 1.6 r	nt of sw	ordfish	
[Swordfish]	Flag	Yr	Vessels	SwoN	SwoMt			
, Para 8	СК	2022	2	28	2.627			
	СК	2023	2	30	1.751			
	СК	2024	1	20	1.653			
Observer coverage	CCM fle	et: Cook Isla	ands					
WCPFC 11	Observe	r coverage o	of longline	fleet activi	ty where h	ooks are	e in hundre	ed hooks
<u>decision –</u>	from log	book						
<u>para 484(b)</u>		l fishing day	-	-				data.
)	Coverag	e percentag	es are rou	nded to th	e nearest v	vhole ni	umber.	
	Flag	Ob Trips ps	sTri TripCo v	Days fishing	ObsSeaD ays	SeaCo v	ObsFishD ays	FishdayC ov
	CK	3	1 33%		-	29%	47	24%
CMM 2009- 06 [Transship ment], Para	Cook Isl	ands vessel	did not co	nduct trar	sshipment	activiti	es	
11 (ANNEX II)								
<u>CMM 2011-</u>		k Islands ves					cetacean	
<u>03</u> [Impact of PS	encircle	ments by pı	irse seine i	nets were	reported in	2024.		
fishing on cetaceans],								
Para 5 CMM 2018-	Thorow	oro no intore	otiono wit	hoophirda	by ony Co		do floggod	voqolin
<u>CITITI 2018-</u>	There we	ere no intera	ICTIONS WIT	ii seabiids	by any CO	UK ISLAN	us nagged	vesserm

¹ Reporting requirements requested by CMMs and decisions of the Commission, as of WCPFC20 (Dec 2023). First issued on 8 April 2024. Changes made from Addendum for 2022 include the revised CMM 2023-03 for North Pacific Swordfish and **WCPFC20 Agreed Audit Points**.

<u>SECTION B:</u> ADDITIONAL ANNUAL REPORTING REQUIREMENTS THAT COULD BE INCLUDED IN ANNUAL REPORT PART 1, IF NOT OTHERWISE REPORTED ANNUALLY TO WCPFC

CMM 2006- 04 [South West striped Marlin], Para 4			itch of	es all CK striped m <u>Vessels</u> 5 3 1	Number	2	south c	of 15S and	I all
<u>CMM 2015-</u> 02 [South Pacific Albacore] Para 4	data to		vho au	tomatica	-	of operationa nese data in 1			-
CMM 2019- 03 [North Pacific Albacore], Para 3	tonnes numbe	s of Nor	th Paci ssels re	ific albaco eported in	ore catches	acific and th reported in t epresents all VessDays 1 148 284 177 22	he pas	st 5 years.	The

<u>CMM 2023-</u> 03 [North Pacific	tonnes o number	f North Pac	ific swordf	ish catche	s reported	the number and metric in the past 5 years. The all longline vessels fish
Swordfish],	Flag	Yr	Vessels	SwoN	SwoMt	
para 4	СК	2022	0	0	0	
	СК	2023	0	0	0	
	СК	2024	0	0	0	