

Longline Fisheries in the Cook Islands

Background

Distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) have conducted fishing operations in the Cook Islands EEZ or an area approximating this in past years (1960-1994). These fleets have included Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese longline vessels targetting predominantly albacore, and frozen sashimi tunas. Several local or locally based longline vessels have been licensed from the period 1994 to mid 1997. The fishing seasons in past years were conducted on a year round basis, by local and locally based longline vessels. The vessels ranged from 16 to 35 metres in length and 30 to 180 GRT. These vessels targeted export quality fish for the fresh chilled and sashimi markets overseas. Fish were caught using horizontal longline gear, and trips were normally one week in duration to coincide with the weekly flights to the U.S markets. Fishing operations were normally concentrated around the various seamounts located within the Cook Islands EEZ, but outside the 12-mile territorial waters around each island. The longline fishery, targetting fresh chilled fish and sashimi grade tuna is considered to be a viable option for the development of the marine sector of the economy.

U.S purse seiners have also operated in the Cook Islands under the U.S Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries. This Treaty allows US vessels access to the Cook Islands EEZ, as part of a multilateral access arrangement between the US and the 16 member countries that make up the Forum Fisheries Committee (FFC). There have only been a handful of trips made by US purse seiners to the Cook Islands Zone since its inception in 1988. The Purse seine fishery is not therefore considered a viable fishery option for the Cook Islands.

In 1998-1999, there were several bilateral arrangements concluded with foreign companies based overseas. Catch from these vessels, operating mainly in the northern part of the CIEEZ has been very high, particularly of albacore, which is unloaded at the cannery in Pago Pago.

Since 1999 however, there has been very little fishing activity in the Cook Islands EEZ. The Cook Islands Government had suspended its licensing programme in support of a fishing venture, Tangaroa Fishing limited, to be based in Penrhyn Atoll. This venture has yet to materialize, so a further four foreign longline vessels were licensed to fish for the 1999 – 2000 season. Catch rates were lower in 1999 than 1998, which was affected by a *la nina* weather pattern.

Requirements of the Fishery

Over the past six years some 1000 metric tonnes have been taken in Cook Islands waters. This represents a considerable sum in terms of its dollar value, and suggests that commercial longline fisheries are a viable consideration in the development the marine sector in the Cook Islands. Of particular importance is the development of local longline expertise, to encourage the development and growth of a local commercial fishery within the Cook Islands. This will allow Cook Islanders to derive maximum benefit from the fisheries resources that occur in the Cook Islands EEZ. Specialised training and gear is therefore needed in order to promote the development of longline fisheries. Both fresh chilled fish and frozen loined fish are viable products for export to markets overseas, and can be considered a lucrative source of revenue to the economy.

Longline Fisheries Summary Statement:

Investigate potential for longline fisheries in the Cook Islands. Identify specific training and gear needed to upskill the local fishers. There is also a need to develop a means for small scale fishers to upgrade operations to a) increase domestic supply of fish; and b) to develop export markets overseas.