

30.10.2018

New maritime surveillance aircraft makes first test flight

- By Anita Roberts
- Oct 30, 2018

Vanuatu and Samoa are primary operating bases of the new FFA maritime surveillance air crafts.

Inset: Pilot Mullins explaining how the advance camera located outside the aircraft is used to Director Pako, acting Police Commissioner Ben, MSA Turnbull and senior officers from Fisheries Department and Airports Vanuatu Limited

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Pilot Mullins explaining how the advance camera located outside the aircraft is used to Director Pako, Deputy Commissioner Ben, MSA Turnbull and senior officers from Fisheries Department and Airports Vanuatu Limited

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One of the maritime surveillance aircraft which will expand the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA)'s air surveillance capacity and service to FFA member countries touched down at the Bauerfield Airport last Friday.

Director of Fisheries, Kalo Pakoa said: "This aircraft will support RVS Tukoro to maximize surveillance operations in our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

"It will monitor illegal fishing boats that are draining our huge revenue. One patrol boat is not enough to survey all corners of our sea and combat the increasing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) activities and even we cannot meet the cost of operating one.

"The revenue that tuna generates annually is Vt500 to Vt600 million. Reduction of IUU activities could increase the figure to Vt1 billion. With the help of the new aircraft

we will be able to find unlawful fishing boats and can actually take action against them. Prosecuting them will bring back government revenue”.

According to Director Pakoa, the aircraft will start operating in February 2019 once the government and FFA finalized the operational control of the defense-funded program in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to be developed.

The aircrafts will be providing aerial surveillance for 365 days per year but can help in additional operations such as search and rescue if requested.

The Director of Fisheries, Acting Police Commissioner Willie Ben and Maritime Surveillance Adviser Lieutenant Commander Rylie Turnbull were briefed by Pilot Josiah Mullins from Technology Service Corp (TSC), the American Engineering company that won the 6-year \$68.388million contract to undertake regional maritime surveillance operations last Friday.

The King Air200 Aircraft is equipped with high tech sensor and camera that can record video from long distances and technology capable of tracking potential threat or illegal fishing activities that can be handed over to prosecutions.

FFA will have two of these aircrafts provide surveillance to the western and central Pacific region, starting from February 2019.

This is part of the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) funded by the government of Australia to strengthen regional maritime security.

Vanuatu and Samoa are confirmed as the primary operating bases for the aircrafts.

Currently, FFA members are receiving between 300 to 400 hours of military aerial surveillance through the Quadrilateral Defense Coordinating Group (QUAD) supported by Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States.

The introduction of new surveillance aircraft will build on the success of the current Pacific Patrol Boats (PPBs) component of the PMSP.

Australia will be replacing up to 21 vessels for countries operating PPS.

Cook Islands, Federate States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Solomon, Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa and Vanuatu which are also participating in the PMSP.