Australian-funded aerial surveillance closes Pacific fisheries 'gaps'

12:27 pm on **12 February 2019**

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Pacific islands continue closing gaps in monitoring, control and surveillance of commercial tuna fishing in the region - with Australia playing an important role in the expanding surveillance program.

Two King Air planes (one of which is pictured) **will provide** 1,400 hours of aerial fisheries surveillance to the 15 Forum Fisheries Agency island members. The planes are being funded by Australia as part of stepped up surveillance and monitoring in the region.Two King Air planes (one of which is pictured) will provide 1,400 hours of aerial fisheries surveillance to the 15 Forum Fisheries Agency island members. The planes are being funded by Australia as part of stepped up surveillance and monitoring in the region. Photo: Forum Fisheries Agency

The challenge is simple: Pacific island nations cover millions of square miles of ocean with only a handful of patrol boats to enforce fisheries rules.

The result: An ongoing and significant level of illegal fishing that is estimated to cost the islands hundreds of millions of dollars a year in lost revenue.

Tevita Tupou, Coordinator of the Forum Fisheries Agency's Regional Aerial Surveillance Program, explained it this way - Marshall Islands waters are three times the size of the American state of Texas. And the Marshall Islands has one patrol boat. Therefore, it's like having one police car to monitor all of Texas.

Now, with Australian funding, aerial surveillance of Pacific waters is expanding to its highest level ever.

On Friday, in Majuro, Marshall Islands Fisheries Minister Dennis Momotaro and Forum Fisheries Agency Director General Dr Manu Tupou-Roosen signed the first aerial surveillance cooperation agreement - the first of what Tupou-Roosen anticipates will soon be 15 agreements as all island members come on board for use of the new fisheries aerial surveillance program.

"I'm grateful to President Hilda Heine, Minister Momotaro and the government here for its continued support to FFA and the region," said Tupou-Roosen.

"It sets the scene for other FFA countries coming on board [to access] this platform for aerial surveillance."

On top of the 300 hours of aerial surveillance provided during four regional fisheries surveillance operations that happen annually, the new Australian-funded program is providing 15 FFA island member nations with 1,400 hours of additional aerial surveillance with two aircraft.

Tupou and Steve Masika, the Aerial Surveillance Planning Officer, were in Majuro for the past week developing details of the fisheries monitoring program with Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority Director Glen Joseph and fisheries department staff.

The additional aerial surveillance started as a pilot project in December 2017. As of 1 March, it becomes a 1,400-hour per year aerial surveillance program managed by FFA, said Tupou.

He described it as a "long-term commitment" by Australia to fisheries surveillance, which also includes provision of patrol boats to FFA members and information sharing and coordination.

The aerial surveillance program will be using two King Air aircraft that are being hired from a US-based company.

"The difference between the 300 hours of aerial surveillance provided by our 'quad' partners - Australia, New Zealand, United States and France - and the 1,400 hours is that FFA members determine where this aerial surveillance will be," Tupou said.

"When the plane is here (by Marshall Islands request), it is a Marshall Islands asset."

"We are going out to all FFA members to ensure they fully understand this opportunity," Tupou said.

"The aim is to make the process work smoothly."

Joseph said the visiting FFA team briefed the Cabinet, and met with Sea Patrol, Customs, Immigration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of its outreach.

He said the program would add value to ongoing monitoring, control and surveillance work.

"We welcome Australia's contribution to security in the region," Joseph said.