

US companies win greater access to lucrative Pacific fisheries

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Pacific island fisheries officials and the United States government have signed a six-year extension to a 27-year-old fisheries treaty confirming American-flagged fishing vessels have continuing access to lucrative Pacific fishing grounds. The signing took place at a meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fishery Commission (WCPFC) in Fiji on December 4.

The South Pacific Tuna Treaty is the US's most important commercial, aid and trade pact within the region. The treaty governs access to the world's biggest fishing grounds, within the 200-mile exclusive economic zones of 17 mostly small Pacific Island states dispersed over vast areas of ocean. The US State Department negotiates access on behalf of American fishing companies, which operate the biggest purse seine (large netting) fleets in the Pacific.

The agreement was hammered out after 18 negotiation rounds over seven years. It almost broke down early this year when Washington notified Pacific island governments of its intention to withdraw from the treaty unless agreement could be reached on new financial terms and increased access.

Washington had agreed to pay \$US89 million for its 2016 fishing rights, but reneged on the deal. Unless it was renegotiated, the treaty stood to expire next month, with devastating consequences for jobs and livelihoods, as well as government revenues, in Pacific states. For small countries like Tuvalu, fishing rights generate as much as 50 percent of total revenue.

Last month, in the lead-up to the WCPFC meeting, the US fishing companies ramped up their pressure. The San Diego-based American Tunaboat Association (ATA) cynically demanded, among other things, a "level playing field" for US companies and the "protection of US fishing rights on the high seas."

ATA executive director Brian Hallman, accompanied

by a group of ATA members, attended the WCPFC meeting to push the industry's demands. Tri Marine International, which has a fishing fleet based in the American Samoa capital Pago Pago, supported by the territory's government officials, called for more fishing days for the US fleet, claiming previous restrictions affected fish delivery to the canneries in American Samoa.

Under the new six-year Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries, the amounts to be paid to the Pacific states are a pittance compared with the enormous profits due to be reaped by the fishing companies. The western and central Pacific tuna fishery is valued at over \$5 billion annually.

The deal allows US vessels to choose the number of fishing days to purchase, at a rate of \$12,500 per fishing day. Hallman said the ATA was particularly pleased with a guaranteed four-year term for fishing days and their cost.

In addition, an industry payment of \$45 million per year and US government fisheries aid of \$21 million annually will go to members of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency that signed the agreement. The "aid" is the total extent of the US government's financial assistance to the poverty-stricken region, which it regards as its own backyard. Washington is meanwhile spending billions of dollars to extensively militarise the Pacific in order to confront China.

In a statement, the US State Department claimed the revised treaty would generate higher economic returns for Pacific countries, "while supporting the continued viable operation of the US fishing fleet in the region." However, American Samoa's Commerce Department Director Keniseli Lafaele told the *Samoa News* that while the treaty secures "continued access to the fishing grounds" by the US-flagged purse seine vessels, it

gives “no special recognition or benefit to the American Samoa tuna industry.”

According to Lafaele, the deal “will not make much difference” in saving the local industry. Tri Marine International’s Samoa Tuna Processors closed its canning operation on December 11, eliminating 800 jobs. StarKist Samoa is also considering more intermittent closures of the country’s only other major cannery, blaming poor fish supplies. The international fishing companies, chasing higher profits and lower costs, are increasingly transferring their processing operations to Asian-based plants.

American Samoa, a designated “unincorporated” US territory with a population of just 55,000, is deeply impoverished. A 2009 study found its poverty rate running at 57.8 percent. A US Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released on December 2 identified \$5.67 as the minimum wage needed for a local family of six to afford to live. This exceeds the hourly minimum wage for cannery workers by \$0.51, according to the GAO.

Under duress from the companies, local authorities have opposed moves to tie the minimum wage to the US federal rate of \$7.25 per hour. Though they make millions on their operations, the canneries have previously threatened to relocate if the minimum wage is raised. They pay no tax and Asian fishing companies avoid US import tariffs on processed fish. In 2014, the territory governor’s office urged against minimum wage rises, calling a scheduled 2015 increase a “prescription for total economic ruin.”

Throughout the Pacific, there is opposition to the rapacious activities of the fishing companies. The environment advocacy group, the Pew Charitable Trusts, called for a two-year ban on fishing for bluefin tuna before the WCPFC meeting. The Pew organisation said independent surveys showed stocks had been critically depleted to just 2.7 percent of the levels that existed before the advent of commercial fishing in the Pacific.

The director of Pew’s tuna conservation campaign, Amanda Nickson, said there had been four years of “delays and lack of adequate action” by key agencies such as the WCPFC and governments, and a moratorium on commercial fishing was urgently needed to allow stocks to regenerate.

In the Cook Islands last month many people turned

up at a presentation by the European Union and Spanish fishing industry to oppose a controversial purse seining agreement the government entered into with the EU. Under the agreement the Cook Islands will receive \$7 million for allowing four European purse seiners to fish for skipjack tuna. Traditional leaders organised the opposition, declaring they did not want “mega-rich Spanish fishing companies” plundering the Cook Islands’ “most important resource.”

Conservation measures for depleted tuna stocks have polarised the WCPFC. According to Radio NZ, WCPFC executive director Feleti Teo said it was proving “extremely difficult” to reach a consensus on protecting depleted tuna stocks.

Management of bluefin tuna is controlled by a subgroup within the WCPFC called the Northern Committee. It is made up of countries located above 20 degrees north latitude, essentially Asian member countries, which have been accused of a complete failure to manage the stock. The WCPFC itself has been accused of not reining in the distant water fishing nations.



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