

## Chairpersons Opening Speech

*Gordon Neil*

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Undersecretary of Fisheries and Aquaculture, delegates and observers, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you all here to the beautiful city of Valdivia for the fourth meeting of the Commission of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation.

I would like to extend our thanks to our Chilean hosts for the gracious and generous hospitality they have shown us in inviting us here and in the very fine facilities they have provided for our meetings. Being here in the city of Valdivia, we have the opportunity to fully understand the importance that fisheries play in the culture and lives of the people of Chile, as is the case for many of us back home.

I am extremely pleased to acknowledge that we have two new Members of our Organisation at the table with us today. I was pleased to receive the news that the Republic of Ecuador deposited its instrument of ratification of the Convention on 11 May last year and that the Republic of Peru did the same on 22 December. On behalf of all Members, I would like to welcome our Ecuadorian and Peruvian colleagues to the table and affirm that we look forward to working with you on the important matters that we established this Organisation to address.

Our Organisation is charged with an important duty. Fish stocks and the marine ecosystems in which they exist are under significant pressure across the world. Despite wide recognition that we must fish in a sustainable way, we are seeing no signs of global effort slowing down.

The importance of ensuring that future generations continue to have access to fish cannot be understated. We have a duty to cooperate to manage this situation. It is important that all of us as a community: coastal states, distant water fishing states, flag states, port states and RFMOs like SPRFMO play our role and accept our responsibilities in ensuring ongoing access to the availability of these resources.

This week we have a number of important tasks ahead of us, all of which go towards ensuring the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fishery resources and in doing so, safeguarding the marine ecosystems in which those resources occur.

Cooperation is extremely important when it comes to stocks that straddle coastal states' exclusive economic zones and the high seas, like the Jack Mackerel stock in the South Pacific Ocean. It is clear that such a stock cannot be sustainably managed if it is overfished by distant water fleets when it is concentrated in the high seas, or if it is overfished by vessels authorised by coastal states when it is concentrated in exclusive economic zones. You will recall that, as an Organisation, we learnt this lesson the hard way.

While our Convention was being negotiated, the Jack Mackerel stock was heavily fished until it was one of the most depleted fish stocks in the world. As a result the spawning biomass was reduced to an estimated 5% of the unfished biomass.

However, when faced with this grave setback, we reacted with a cooperative spirit. We worked together to build a sturdy and effective regime for the future. We voluntarily contributed detailed fishing data, we listened to advice from our scientists and we formed an agreement, at first voluntarily, and then on a binding basis, to restrict our catch to the level that our scientists advised us would allow the stock to rebuild.

The latest advice from our Scientific Committee is that the population trend of the Jack Mackerel stock is estimated to be increasing. Biomass is believed to be rebuilding. If we continue to cooperate to restrict our catch to current levels, the stock has a reasonable probability of increased spawning biomass. One of our key tasks this week will be to agree on the allocation of catch, consistent with this important advice.

These negotiations have not always been easy. As in previous years, we have sensitive discussions ahead of us. However, I have no doubt that each of us will approach this discussion with the cooperative spirit that has been demonstrated in the past. I have full confidence that we will reach an outcome that takes full account of the scientific advice provided to us and that we will keep our sights set on the importance of rebuilding the depleted stock for the future.

We will also need to focus our attention on a number of other important matters this week.

The importance of an effective vessel monitoring system was clear to us even early on. Accordingly, our Convention requires us to develop a vessel monitoring system that will monitor the movements of fishing vessels in the South Pacific Ocean. This will be an important tool for us going forward, which will support the measures we are putting in place to regulate fishing activity in the Convention Area. Our VMS working group has worked hard throughout the year. This week we will need to build on their work by agreeing upon a final proposal for a VMS tender document. A call for tenders can then be published, bringing us one step closer to establishing an effective VMS.

We will consider a proposal for a new conservation and management measure which establishes a framework process for undertaking exploratory fishing in the South Pacific Ocean. This approach will ensure we are fulfilling our responsibilities set out in the Convention to ensure exploratory fisheries are developed on a precautionary and gradual basis and that appropriate conservation and management measures are in place to ensure the fishery and marine ecosystem are appropriately managed and protected from the adverse impacts of fishing activity.

We must also examine draft list of vessels that appear to be engaging in Illegal Unreported or Unregulated fishing in the South Pacific Ocean. IUU fishing undermines the cooperative efforts of States through organisations such as this one to regulate and manage fishing by those fishing legitimately. We have a duty to provide a strong message to those that fish illegally in the South Pacific Ocean that this Organisation will not tolerate such conduct.

We should also commence this meeting conscious of our more recent achievements. On 24 August last year, SPRFMO's at sea boarding and inspection procedures became those contained in Articles 21 and 22 of the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement. Our adoption of this regime comes about after a

disappointing result the year before — we were not able to agree on a SPRFMO-specific boarding and inspection regime. Reopening these discussions is an option that is still open to us in the future.

However, with the Fish Stocks Agreement regime in place we are now in a strong position and have added an important element to our monitoring compliance and enforcement framework. Our new regime is robust and will be a very effective monitoring and compliance tool.

From 1 March this year, after hard work and successful negotiations in Auckland in 2014, the Organisation will have a regime in place to manage transshipment on the high seas. Like our inspection regime, this will add to the important foundations we have established for this Organisation.

I am very conscious of the commitment and dedication of many that have gone into setting out the foundations of this Organisation and developing in its early years. We owe a great debt to Bill Mansfield who very ably oversaw this Organisation for a number of years and played a significant role in growing it into the Organisation it is today.

Our community was also deeply saddened last year by the passing of Dr Robin Allen, who served as our interim Executive Secretary and who played a significant role in the negotiations of the Convention. Robin's extensive experience and knowledge was of enormous benefit to the Organisation. His kind and gentle nature made him a much respected and valued friend and mentor to many of us.

We have a contemporary, best practice Convention which is at the forefront of RFMO legal frameworks. Despite being a young Organisation, we have adopted a number of critical conservation and management measures which regulate, for example, the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems, IUU listing, bycatch of seabirds, and the provision of important data to inform the advice underpinning our decisions. We have 15 Members and 5 cooperating Parties who are committed to fulfilling the objectives of our Convention. We have an established, hardworking Secretariat supporting us and we have developed a reliable pattern of working together annually to pursue our common goals.

We should be proud of what we have achieved thus far— we are an effective and respected Organisation. But we must acknowledge that we have far to go. The international fisheries community, and even those beyond, will be watching the steps we take this week: the decisions that we make, the outcomes we achieve.

For coastal States, creating an effective Organisation is important in facilitating appropriate management of high seas straddling stocks catches, and provides comfort that distant water fishing fleets are respecting coastal State rights. For distant water fishers, an effective Organisation ensures that straddling stocks are sustainably managed, that IUU fishing will not be tolerated and that distant water fleets will not function at a disadvantage against IUU vessels. However, we all need to acknowledge that when we operate together as a strong Organisation, we also serve the wider international community by upholding the integrity of the marine ecosystems of the vast South Pacific Ocean.

We have a number of challenges ahead of us this week. However, I would like to take the opportunity to remind you of the adversity we have faced in the past, and how, through

cooperation, we have reached sound solutions. As we approach our discussions this week we should recall the important goals we were pursuing when we established SPRFMO, including ensuring that the fish stocks and marine ecosystems that we are responsible for are protected and managed sustainably into the future.

With that in mind, I very much look forward to working with you all this week.