



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM (PIF) BACKGROUND GUIDE

MID-AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS CONFERENCE
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PRESENTED BY



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM (PIF)

A. THREATS OF CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED SEA-LEVEL RISE ON MARITIME ZONES, STATEHOOD AND OUR PEOPLE

Members of the Pacific Islands Forum are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. While PIF Members contribute less than .2% of global carbon dioxide emissions (not including Australia), the region sees many of the most severe effects of global climate change. Weather-related disasters are more common and costly, often contributing to coastal erosion and reef damage. King tides and storm-wave-induced overwash, exacerbated by rising sea levels, have displaced people from coastal areas, contaminated groundwater, and made agricultural lands unusable. At just a few meters above sea level, low-lying atoll countries, such as Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tokelau, and Tuvalu, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Experts fear that sea level rise could make these countries uninhabitable within the century and threaten their sovereignty and statehood. The legal ramifications of these outcomes are unprecedented and uncertain.

Given the miniscule contributions of the region to conditions that are driving climate change, PIF Members have limited ability to mitigate or lessen the impacts of climate change and associated sea-level rise through emission reductions. While PIF members have a leadership role in advocating for global climate action, they must also concentrate on adaptation measures for their populations to live with the effects of climate change. Adaptation measures can take many forms, including improvements and repairs to infrastructure such as water systems, sewage systems, roads, seaports, and airports. Across the Pacific, these types of infrastructure have been impacted by sea level rise, overwash flooding, coastal erosion, and increased salinity in soil, which affects groundwater and agriculture. Adaptation also includes direct consideration for the people who must relocate due to sea level rise. Climate adaptation comes with significant costs, often beyond the means of local governments. With this reality, financing of climate adaptation is a key issue for PIF leaders, who must consider regional approaches to the issues, as well as solutions that include private investment and support from countries beyond the region.

Many intergovernmental organizations, including PIF, have laid out strategies for climate financing and combating the risks of climate change, however execution of these strategies remain tenuous in the face of climate realities. Some countries must also contend with the uncertainty of their statehood in the face of sea level rise. In 2021, PIF members took a major step on this issue, agreeing that each country's respective maritime zone would remain fixed under United Nations Conventions even if sea-level rise altered land masses. However, the question of statehood of uninhabitable countries and the status of entire nations of climate refugees remain challenges for the PIF and require regional solutions.

<https://www.forumsec.org/resilientpacific/>

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/pacific-islands-forum-leaders-want-focus-climate-change-not-geopolitics>

<https://www.forumsec.org/2022/11/11/remarks-sg-puna-on-statehood-livelihoods-sea-level-rise-at-cop27-side-event/>
<https://www.usgs.gov/centers/pcmssc/science/impact-sea-level-rise-and-climate-change-pacific-ocean-atolls>
<https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-09-02/international-pacific-islands-forum-declares-fixed-maritime-zones-in-response-to-threats-of-sea-level-rise-due-to-climate-change>

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B. REGIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

For most Members of the Pacific Islands Forum, fisheries are a critical contributor to national economies, directly or indirectly supporting the livelihoods of millions of Pacific Islanders. Due to the outsized importance of this sector, responsible practices in fisheries are critical to the sustainable development and long-term economic health of PIF Members. Given that fisheries are a shared resource and many fish stocks, most notably tuna, are highly migratory, international cooperation on this topic is key to the region.

Composed of PIF Member States, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) was founded in 1971 to strengthen cooperation in the management and development of tuna fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of PIF Members. Among other services, the FFA provides support to monitor EEZs for illegal fishing operations and increases capacity of PIF Members to sustainably harvest, process and market tuna to support livelihoods.

The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) was formed through an international treaty in 2004, and is devoted to conserving and managing highly migratory fish stocks, including tuna. While PIF Member States make up a majority of the WCPFC, the commission also comprises countries beyond the immediate region, including China, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and Indonesia. Many of these countries rent fishing access in the EEZs of PIF Members. Decisions of the WCPFC are legally binding.

Like fisheries worldwide, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and the impacts of climate change are chief among the concerns of PIF leaders as each can threaten fish stocks across the Pacific. In a September 2023 address, along with these two challenges, PIF Secretary General Henry Puna pointed to “the flow-on impacts of trade and market dynamics” in the tuna industry as a threat to the PIF, as volatility in tuna markets can have major consequences to government revenues. Among PIF Members, fishing access rights and revenues are also an important issue. According to Puna, the Pacific needs to lessen its reliance on access revenues and diversify the fisheries industry.

<https://www.forumsec.org/fisheries/>

<https://ffa.int/about>

<https://www.wcpfc.int/about-wcpfc>

<https://pasifika.news/2023/09/future-of-prosperity-lies-in-our-ocean-its-fishery-and-its-resources-forum-sg/>

