



## PIFS HIGH LEVEL MINISTERIAL DSM TALANOA:

### **Cook Islands General Statement delivered by Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister Honourable Sonny Williams**

**21<sup>st</sup> February 2025**

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Honoured Leaders, Ministers, Secretary General Waqa, Commissioner Manoni, Distinguished Delegates...

Kia Orana,

It's a privilege to represent our Prime Minister the Honourable Mark Brown in these important deliberations. On his behalf, I extend his sincere apologies for not being here today, along with his firm assurances of the Cook Islands commitment to support and rally our region around a common vision, with regard to the management of our shared Pacific Ocean heritage.

50 years ago, in 1974, former Cook Islands Premier Sir Albert Henry addressed the UN General Assembly with a powerful message about our nation's aspirations for the oceans. His words remain as relevant today as they were then. Half a century later, we restate our commitment to the principles of fairness, mutual respect, sustainability and environmental stewardship – the cornerstones of our approach to seabed minerals.

As we intricately know, the Pacific Ocean is the very pulse of our identity, cultures and economies. She sustains our people, defines our way of life, and holds the wisdom of our ancestors. They declared: **Our relationship with the ocean is sacred and non-negotiable.**

Just as we successfully developed and safeguarded our fisheries resources, we also recognize the importance of caution in navigating deep sea minerals. Our enduring objective is to ensure the long-term welfare of our communities without compromising the health and integrity of our marine ecosystems – that has always been our anchor point. **Our commitment to responsible exploration is only matched by our commitment to the wellbeing and security of our Pacific Family.**

Yes – deep sea minerals presents a transformative opportunity – not just economically but also in advancing environmental protections, cultural resilience, and social progress. As an emerging

leader in this sector, the Cook Islands remains resolute in ensuring that economic ambition never outpaces environmental responsibility.

This year, the Cook Islands proudly marks 60 years of self-governance. With each passing decade, we've worked to reinforce the steel of our sovereignty – investing in our institutions, legal frameworks and governance structures to ensure we stand firmly on our own feet. **And time has been our greatest ally.** For over 20 years, we have invested heavily in building a robust legal and regulatory framework strengthened by expansive scientific research, active community engagement and international best practices. This growing knowledge base sits at the core of our decision-making, ensuring that every step we take is informed, deliberate and responsible. Our engagement with our people is the spark behind the policy. These governance tenets are not just process, they are the foundation upon which we safeguard our sovereignty.

This commitment therefore extends beyond governance. It is about **nurturing generations of Pacific scientists, policymakers, educators, and leaders who are hardwired to manage our ocean resources responsibly. This is the precautionary approach in action.** And we as Governments must be prepared to facilitate these pathways of impact.

In this effort, we call for deeper support from our CROP agencies to propel our research ambitions forward. We look to **SPC, SPREP** and **FFA** for scientific guidance that will deepen our understanding and bolster our environmental stewardship and economic security. We look to **USP** to drive innovation and higher education tailored to our diverse cultures and development needs. And we look to the **Forum Secretariat** to ensure that seabed mineral development continues to align strategically with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific.

This brings me to the crux of our deliberations. I wish to acknowledge our technical officials for their efforts, and request we draw attention to 3 key issues:

**First**, the value of **establishing a cohesive regional framework to coordinate**, particularly in the face of evolving geostrategic challenges. The need to ensure sustainable and responsible management of our seabed minerals requires us to acknowledge the diverse positions of member states and their sovereign rights. Is the current state of play in our best interest?

**Second, we must address gaps in scientific data and traditional knowledge.** Our policies must be based on a common understanding of credible, regionally relevant information, and we seek support in further expanding and reviewing the new knowledge and science that is emerging. **A regional seabed minerals atlas and a study on potential transboundary impacts would be critical tools to guide informed decision-making.** These, backed by a fully-functioning centralized data repository system, and fully-resourced capacity-building initiatives, will empower our nations to act with greater confidence. How can we achieve this?

**Third, and possibly most critical, we must commit to ongoing collaboration and dialogue.** There is a proverb in the Cook Islands: *“E tai roa te kopu, ka pā te ‘ao,”* meaning, ‘when the stomach is full, the mind is clear’. We’re therefore pleased with the strong show of political strength today. It’s our firm belief that the security and prosperity of our region is only significantly enhanced when we row in the same direction.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia.