

# Ministerial Statement

To be delivered by

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**Minister of Agriculture**

**Government of the Cook Islands**

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**(APRC - 35)**

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**Item 11          Prioritization of Country and Regional Needs**

Interventions will be scheduled in alphabetical order of country name.

**Statement:**

Kia Orana tatou katoatoa,

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates and observers it is my honour to address you all today as the Head of Delegation and as Minister for Agriculture. On behalf of the people and Government of the Cook Islands, I extend a warm Kia Orana and Meitaki Maata to FAO for facilitating this virtual session of the 35th FAO Asia Pacific Regional Conference.

Kia Orana to the FAO Director General Dr Qu Dongyu. (Pronunciation: Jo dongyoo) Thank you for FAO's continued assistance to member countries persevering with the safe management of our peoples and resources through this challenging time in the world's history.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its global impact. At the country level, we have responded with swift and strong measures to ensure the protection of our people from COVID19, and the national security threats it poses to the health, livelihoods, food and economic security of our nation.

We have carefully planned and implemented programs to alleviate the consequence that closing our borders has had on our health and economic sectors. The Cook Islands' renewed and determined focus on our primary sector is vital to our economic recovery as our reliance on tourism has been severely compromised by the pandemic. Rising unemployment levels, reduced revenue generation and the need for assistance from development partners has highlighted the need for innovation and economic diversification as part of our rebuilding strategy.

Concentrating action on food supply chains and improving primary production to ensure the availability of food supply, access to markets and trade, and economic stimulus is essential. The Ministry of Agriculture's "agriculture recovery support package" for commercial and non-commercial growers was established to sustain the agriculture sector for a prolonged period. Assistance with agricultural diversification through innovation and the production of



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climate-smart and nutrient dense crops for enhancing crop biodiversity is both a need and priority for the Cook Islands.

Coastal and offshore fisheries continue to be an important resource in sustaining our food security and our economy. Demand and pressure on coastal fisheries resources to support local communities and livelihoods has increased, and therefore the need to ensure that sustainable management practices, both traditional and contemporary, are reinforced. The importance of maintaining business continuity in our offshore sector, especially our tuna fisheries, lends its importance to the social, economic and development goals of our country, which has never been more pronounced.

As we reset our primary industries and work towards rebuilding our economy, we must remain vigilant in keeping the Cook Islands COVID-19 free. In this respect, the protection of our borders is critical, and initiatives such as the recent development of COVID-19 operating protocols for the fishing sector developed by Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency countries are essential to minimise the risk of transmission, and to manage the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

In planning for the next 5 years, our agriculture and fisheries sectors are tasked to identify and create new pathways towards ecologically sustainable fisheries, and carefully managed agro-ecological farming.

Broadening the range of value-added products, establishing new livelihood options, supporting detailed enhancement of domestic value chains, changes to production methods and seeking to establish the Cook Islands in international niche markets is critical to the diversification of our economy. Critically, seeking support from partners to build up our capacity to step up to these challenges.

Our primary industries must also improve resilience to climate change through adaptive methods; utilising new and better technologies to improve and increase production and processing techniques.

Our Biosecurity systems must be robust to prevent intrusions by exotic pests and diseases that threaten our way of life, our unique island environment and ecosystems, and the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Utilising emerging technologies will support our aim of advancing national capabilities, and in stepping up our efforts to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing within our EEZ and region, with our Pacific partners to safeguard our marine resources.



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The collaboration and unity gained nationally, regionally and internationally during the COVID-19 situation is the key to take us through this recovery phase and to re-position primary industries at the forefront of a long term vision for a strong and vibrant economy based upon a model of efficiency, diversification and sustainability.

We look to the FAO and our development partners to aid the implementation of our new focus. Together with the strength of our people, we will achieve our long term vision.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia