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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Tuna Commission welcomes prominence of fisheries at 38<sup>th</sup> Forum**

*Nuku'alofa, Tonga:* Forum Leaders, meeting during the retreat at Vava'u, Tonga on the occasion of the 38<sup>th</sup> Pacific Islands Forum agreed last week to formally invite the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) to observe future meetings of the Forum. Mr Glenn Hurry, Chairman of the Commission, welcomed the invitation. Speaking from Canberra, he said "taking into account the other major issues before leaders it is extremely encouraging that the Tongan Forum elevated fisheries to a level of prominence that is long overdue". He expressed appreciation to Leaders and officials for the effort involved in securing this level of political recognition and hoped that it would lead to greater attention to the many priority issues that increasingly challenge the region's fisheries management agencies.

Andrew Wright, the Executive Director of the Pohnpei-based WCPFC, in Tonga for the Forum, looked forward to the Commission working closely with officials and regional agencies in a combined effort to ensure regional tuna stocks are effectively managed. He said that the potential to contribute to long term economic development aspirations in Pacific Island members, in particular small island developing States, can only be realized if tuna stocks are managed within sustainable limits. He said "tuna catches from the region now exceed 2 million tonnes annually".

Pacific Island countries make up almost 50% of the membership of the WCPFC and catches from within the national waters of these countries account for 44% of the region's total tuna catch. As a result, Pacific Island countries have significant capacity to influence exploitation levels and address challenges, such as those associated with over-fishing. He noted with concern that available information suggests that, despite WCPFC Members agreeing to cap recent levels of fishing effort, current indications are that these limits are being exceeded. While he acknowledged that this was a major challenge for the Commission, he believes that an opportunity existed for Pacific Island countries to display leadership and responsibility to address over-fishing concerns.

Mr Wright said that... "the commitment to implement and strengthen WCPFC conservation and management arrangements recorded in the Vava'u Declaration on Pacific Fisheries Resources: Our Fish, clearly demonstrated strong and committed leadership to work collaboratively to ensure fisheries for tuna in the WCPO are managed within sustainable limits". He said that a significant coordinated effort was required in order to achieve these outcomes and that the forthcoming annual session of the Commission, scheduled for the first week of December at Guam, was an excellent opportunity to implement many of the commitments made in Vava'u". *Ends.*