



Cook Islands NEWS
AS SOLID AS THE ISLANDS WE STAND FOR

Opinion

EU deal show of foolishness

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TOGETHER, the people of the Cook Islands are watching prime minister Henry Puna's government make a series of fundamental mistakes that will hurt our people for decades to come.

Like many nations, the Cook Islands are required by global environmental circumstances to make careful judgments: we must manage our precariously-depleted marine resources at the same time as we take care of our human needs.

Puna's government has repeatedly demonstrated they are incapable of doing this.

Through greed and incompetence, the government has run out of money. Tourism is up and revenues are healthy, so you would think overspending would be tough to do. But this government is spectacularly wasteful, misappropriating massive amounts for non-priority areas. Everyone knows what these expenditures are.

As a result, the country is desperately short of money, and Puna doesn't have enough courage or integrity to allow parliament to sit long enough to formulate and debate budgets properly.

Most of you know the government's solution to its cash problem: They are determined to make a foolish and perhaps terminally disastrous deal to allow purse-seine fishing - hypocritically, in the same waters that were recently declared the "largest marine park in the world".

The government is selling these fishing licenses in spite of broad public opposition. A High Court Judicial Review will be heard in March next year, largely brought about by pressure from the traditional leaders of the country and from a majority of the people.

The government is selling these fishing licenses in spite of broad condemnation from the experts. In a report on the Cook Islands fishery, Dyhia Belhabib (PhD), from the University of British Columbia's Sea Around Us Institute, says bio-mass in Cook Islands waters has been reduced by 75 per cent since 1970, primarily as a result of purse-seine fishing. Every fisherman who has lived and fished in the Cook Islands would probably agree: our fish stocks are at a historical low.

The government is selling these fishing licenses in spite of the very poor compliance and environmental record of the Spanish fleet. Out of many examples of Spanish-fleet misconduct, we should look most closely at the experience of Kiribati, who did not renew the agreements they had in place with the same Spanish company seeking to fish in our waters.

According to the Forum Fishery Association website, in Kiribati the "EU purse-seine catch exceeded the FPA reference tonnage by 40 per cent."

The government is selling these fishing licenses in spite of our inability to monitor and control the volume of licensed fish and by-catch in such a huge area. The government has proposed no effective plan to do so.

We must evidently rely on outsiders to protect us from our own government.

A few representatives in the European Parliament have some sense of right and wrong and know of the High Court case pending. Let's hope they regard the signature of PM Puna on the EU/Spanish purse-seining agreement as morally and legally questionable, and oppose industry lobbyists who are pushing for a speedy implementation.

Court battles of this nature are generally characterised as "The People" versus "some commercial interest", with "The People" usually being government in its role as advocate for the public interest.

Ironically, in this case, "The People" is a non-governmental collective: Four thousand signatories to a petition, the Aronga Mana, and Te Ipukarea Society.

This battle is between The People and their own government, who collude with foreign commercial interests.

Puna has chosen the wrong side.

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