

## 22<sup>nd</sup> OCO ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020

---

### COMMUNIQUE

1. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) with the theme ***“Working together to build a safer Blue Pacific”*** was convened virtually on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020 in view of the restricted travel conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the first time the Annual Conference has been convened virtually.
2. The meeting was attended by 19 Heads of Customs Administrations of the Governments or their respective nominees from Australia, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Guam, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Timor Leste. New Caledonia in attending represented French Polynesia and Wallis & Futuna as members whereas American Samoa and Kiribati were not able to attend.
3. The Conference was opened and led by the Chair Mr Xavier Mitchell, the Comptroller of Cook Islands Customs. In his opening remarks, the Chair acknowledged the commitment of its major donor partners Australia, Fiji and New Zealand. He noted that many other OCO partners are unable to participate in this conference due to travel restrictions. The Chair nonetheless thanked and acknowledged their contribution.
4. The Chair thanked the Vice Chair, the Steering Committee and its members as well as the Head of the Secretariat and his staff for all the work throughout the year as well as the preparation leading up to this conference.
5. The Chair stated that COVID-19 forcefully teaches us to change our course and our ways rapidly and immediately. It has caused major impacts on our economies and Customs in the Pacific region; it is however still critical that we continue to facilitate trade and earn revenue that is needed now more than ever for our governments.

6. The Chair further highlighted the need to “continue to strengthen collective actions to effectively manage the regional security environment”. The Chair further noted that “Not only do nations have to protect themselves from COVID-19, there are emerging threats within the Customs environment such as the trade of counterfeit goods, illicit financial flows, trafficking of people, drugs and weapons and money laundering that require strong focus.”
7. Members discussed the impact of COVID-19 on their respective countries and their national responses, including border measures to protect their citizens. Members noted the priorities placed on ensuring the facilitation of essential goods by Customs administrations are consistent with the health protocols that were in place. The significant drop of Customs revenue collection as a result of lower trade volumes and decline in tourism was a common impact felt by the OCO members and that measure to raise revenue remained members’ priorities in the post-COVID-19 environment.
8. Members commended the work program and achievements made by the OCO Secretariat for the period from July 2019 to June 2020 reflected in the OCO Interim Annual Report. The members acknowledged the support of a large network of partners who helped fund capacity building activities, implemented the work program and offered their knowledge and expertise to support the activities carried out by the OCO.
9. Members noted the interim financial results for the fiscal year ended 30 June 2020 that was presented.
10. Members approved the two-year work program and budget for the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2022. Members also highlighted and acknowledged the implementation challenges and commended the Secretariat for developing a work plan aimed at addressing members’ needs. The work program incorporated core customs training modules based on international customs best practice and learning tools, including, modules developed by the Centre for Customs and Excise Studies in Australia. In addition, members noted that the two-year work program 2020 – 2022 may negatively impact on the fiscal outlook for these years, but remain confident that this could be managed within existing resources. With the significant adverse impact on national and border revenues, member

countries highlighted that revenue mobilisation remained a top priority for consideration in the work plan.

11. Members agreed to discuss the Review of OCO Administration Policy and a proposed update of OCO Charter out of session given time constraints.
12. Members approved to waive the annual membership fee for the Lower Tier Host nations.
13. In accordance with article 3 of the Charter of the OCO, the members appointed new representatives of the three sub-regions to the Steering Committee for the next two years; Guam (Micronesia), Papua New Guinea (Melanesia) and Tonga (Polynesia) to support the permanent members Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. The members also acknowledged the contribution of the outgoing Steering Committee members Kiribati, Samoa and Solomon Islands.
14. With the aim to strengthen information sharing between members and stakeholders in the region in support of core customs functions, the members appointed the following member countries, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Palau, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as members of the Information Sharing Working Group (ISWG). New Zealand accepted their nomination to the ISWG under consideration and to reconfirm their position.
15. Members approved for the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to host the next annual conference in 2021. Members also noted and agreed that in light of Cook Islands being unable to physically host the 2020 conference that they would be offered the opportunity to host the 2022 conference.
16. Members noted the invitation from Australia regarding the Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting to be held in November 2020, and further noted the provision of conferencing systems by Australia to Pacific countries to allow regional leaders to participate in the virtual meeting.
17. Members expressed their sincere gratitude to Cook Islands for its contribution as Chair of the OCO, Annual Conference and Steering Committee in the past year, and welcomed Federated States of Micronesia as the new OCO Chair and for the conference in 2020-2021.