



24th OCO ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2022

“Scaling Up Customs Digitisation in The Pacific”

COMMUNIQUE

1. The twenty-fourth (24th) Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) Conference was held on 6th September 2022, virtually for the third consecutive year due to continued prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Conference adopted the theme “**Scaling Up Customs Digitisation in the Pacific**” acknowledging the need for Pacific Customs administrations to upgrade their systems and embrace automation and technological advancement.
2. The conference was attended by twenty-one (21) heads of Customs administrations or their respective nominees from American Samoa, Australia, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. New Caledonia also represented Wallis and Futuna. Samoa and Timor Leste were not represented in the meeting. OCO development partners, PICP, PIDC, PPIU, PITAA and UNCTAD attended the open session of the conference.
3. OCO Chairperson and Comptroller of Cook Islands Customs, Mr Xavier Mitchell opened the conference. He acknowledged the contribution of late Chair Mr. Salvador Jacob. The Chair also acknowledged the commitment of OCO’s major donor partners Australia, Fiji and New Zealand as well as OCO’s development partners such as CCES, USPTO, UNCTAD who worked with the OCO Secretariat to provide capacity building and technical assistance to OCO members.
4. The Chair also thanked OCO members, OCO Vice Chair Mr Randy Sue of the Federated States of Micronesia, OCO Steering Committee and its members, OCO Secretariat staff for persevering and continuing to fulfil the roles and responsibilities of Customs during one of the most challenging times in history. Mr Mitchell also acknowledged the leadership of former Head of Secretariat, Mr. Richard Brennan and current Acting Head of the Secretariat, Mrs. Irma Daphney Stone for taking over in the lead up to the conference.

5. Professor David Widdowson of the Centre for Customs and Excise Studies, Charles Sturt University addressed the conference and highlighted the need for administrations to embrace technology to remain relevant. He shared his views on digitising Customs Administrations and further scaling up the potential to increase efficiency and effectiveness. He emphasized that “governance by data is the growing development trend by Customs administrations, globally.”
6. The Secretariat acknowledged and thanked Professor Widdowson for accepting the invitation to speak to the Conference and the important role digitisation plays in Customs work. The partnership between OCO and the Centre for Customs and Excise Studies was also mentioned especially in building the capacity of OCO and its members during the height of the pandemic.
7. The Secretariat thanked Chair, Mr. Xavier Mitchell and the Steering Committee for the continued support of the Secretariat. It has not been the easiest of times, but with the Chair and Committee’s leadership it was bearable.
8. The Secretariat thanked the members for the membership funding, Australia and New Zealand for the grant funding to enable implementation of initiatives that were conducted during the 2021 22 period, which concludes the 2017 2022 Strategic period. Some of the activities recently delivered include the CCES online learning CERT III & IV, the inaugural Pacific Women Profession Development program (PWPDP) and the Customs Brokers online course and the rolling out of the OPSCA.
9. The Secretariat also acknowledge the work and leadership that Mr Richard Brennan had provided OCO in the last 3 years.
10. The Secretariat presented the OCO Draft Annual Report for the financial year ending June 2022. Members noted:
 - a. the progress in the implementation of the OCO Pacific Small Craft App and Maritime Border Fundamentals Training,
 - b. the development and availability of the Customs Brokers online training platform,
 - c. adoption of PACHS 2022.
 - d. Collaboration with Secretariat of the International Narcotics Board to address illicit trade of dangerous substances
 - e. work with WCO to prepare the Pacific Customs Administrations for natural disaster response and conducting Data Analytics Workshop,

- f. efforts in the implementation of PACER Plus,
 - g. partnership with USPTO in upgrading IPR laws and IPR training for OCO members,
 - h. the successful implementation of the Pacific Women's Professional Development Program (PWPDP), Centre for Customs and Excise Studies online learning,
 - i. Joint OCO/PITAA workshop on Valuation and VAT.
 - j. partnership work with the WHO with illicit tobacco trade activity.
 - k. The Secretariat noted the changed mode of delivery for training, and the challenges of staff turnover. The on-boarding of new staff is improving the situation.
11. Members noted the Interim financial results for the fiscal year ended 30 June 2022 and further noted the scheduled audit date after which the financials will be incorporated in the OCO Annual Report 2021-2022.
 12. The Secretariat noted the work of the consultants drafting the Strategic Plan 2022-2027 and acknowledged the input provided by Members.
 13. Members acknowledged the work of the OCO, its Members and Consultants to draft the Strategic Plan 2022-2027. Members also noted that the Plan recognises a number of challenges faced in the region, including those that have developed or changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the increased levels of transnational crime and the increased demand on the resourcing and capacity of Customs administrations.
 14. Members noted the importance of developing a solid Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework that is focused on outcome measurement, in support of the ongoing work plan. The Chair acknowledged that outcome-measurement focused M&E is crucial going forward.
 15. Members accepted and approved the new Strategic Plan 2022-2027 in consideration of forecasted changes in international movements and anticipated developments. The new Strategic Plan strives to take steps towards future readiness of OCO Members.
 16. Members noted the 'two-budget presented as one' caters for the EDF 11 funding whilst the other was without the EDF 11 funding. Members approved the multi-year budget and work plan 2022-2023 to 2024-2025 which includes the EDF 11 funded work plan. Members appreciated the grant funding by the UNCTAD

- through the European Commission Financing Agreement – EDF 11 Program support.
17. The Secretariat noted the financial support received from Australia and New Zealand.
 18. Members noted that the expenditure in future years needs to be well monitored.
 19. Members requested clarification on funding from the other revenue funding lines, the Secretariat advised that the line represented income support from the United States Patent and Trademark Office of \$US100,000 annual funding to support the Intellectual Property Rights work plus funding from the US Department of Interior for Guam's Customs modernisation work.
 20. Members stressed and alluded to the importance of the Steering Committee's continual guidance and review of spending's midway through the financial year. Members also took note of the 2022-2025 Work Program Commentary.
 21. Members approved to maintain the current membership fee structure for the new fiscal year 2022-2023.
 22. Members noted the UNCTAD-OCO Grant Agreement and the presented Minutes of SC sub-committee UNCTAD EDF 11 GFA and approved the OCO Secretariat to sign the agreement with UNCTAD in consideration of recommended governance as highlighted in the Minutes of the meeting held by the SC sub-committee.
 23. Members approved the signing of the EDF 11, selecting Option 3 as the governance recommendation (a technical sub-committee – consisting of representatives from UNCTAD, PACP, and OCO). Members approved the creation of a technical sub-committee and elected Australia, FSM, Niue and Vanuatu as the OCO representatives to the sub-committee).
 24. Members acknowledged the work of the Steering Committee up to the Conference, nominated and approved the new representatives of the three sub-regions Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia to serve on the OCO Steering Committee for the next two years. The new appointees are **Palau** (Micronesia), **Solomon Islands** (Melanesia) and **Tuvalu** (Polynesia), whilst Australia, New Zealand and, Fiji as permanent members and noting FSM is the incoming Chair and Fiji is the Vice-Chair given they will be host 2024.

25. Members approved the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) joins the OCO, PICP and PIDC partnership agreement. The new inclusion will positively contribute to the maritime domain security.
26. Members acknowledged the importance of addressing the threat of increased criminal activity in the maritime domain. Members noted that as this agreement may require significant operational commitment, careful consideration be given on how to balance the OCO's contribution to the FFA partnership in a manner that does not cause impost to the OCO's current priorities.
27. Members noted that there was no change to the Administration Policy during the period and agreed to the proposed changes to the OCO Finance Regulations, Policy and Procedures 2021. Members endorsed the updates to OCO Admin Policy and revised the Regulation 27.
28. Members endorsed the need to cover the odd OCO member staff who does not have the travel insurance to cover for the COVID-19 when travelling on OCO course. This is now agreed to be incorporated in the OCO Policy. Members also approved to use the Fiji Care insurance to cover against protracted quarantine whilst in Fiji.
29. Members noted the update and further actions needed with the current review of the Capability and the Remuneration Framework. The Secretariat noted the impact of staff turnover during the past year on their ability to support current activities. Recruitment agency Maxumise are assisting with process to conduct the Job Evaluation Exercise and will be reported to the members through the Steering Committee was finalised.
30. Members were updated by the Chair of the subcommittee for the recruitment of the Head of Secretariat on the recruitment progress for the Head of Secretariat position. He noted that the application process will close on the 16th September 2022. After a short review process, interviews are expected to commence in mid-October. The Steering Committee will assist with the review process. The process is expected to continue until late November before a new Head of Secretariat is secured.
31. Members approved the appointment of Ernst & Young as external auditor of OCO for a consecutive three-year term and approved the appointment of KPMG as internal auditor of the OCO for a consecutive three-year term.

32. The Secretariat noted that the planned UNCTAD OCO agreement signing could not proceed at this meeting due to documentation requiring submission to UNCTAD prior to signing. Signing has been postponed to a later date.
33. French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Customs cooperation with the OCO which was originally signed by some of our members in 2018. This completes the 23 members signing the MOU.
34. The MOU on Cooperation in Customs Matters between the Pacific Island Countries (signatories to the MOU) and the OCO Secretariat recognizes and acknowledges the role of the OCO Secretariat – facilitating its goals and missions within the OCO membership.
35. The MOU emanates authority to the OCO Secretariat to recognize the customs and related national laws and legislation of its' membership and to cooperate and collaborate with the membership to address customs and border management by ensuring the appropriate customs laws are applied, sharing best technical practices, disclosing legislative, scientific and technical knowledge and expertise, and coordinating joint operations through national and international joint operations.
36. Members provided their updates on their Customs administrations' response to Covid-19 issues, reopening of international borders and their key achievements for 2021/22.
37. Members approved FSM to host the 2023 annual conference and Fiji to host the 2024 annual conference in person followed by Guam. **FSM** acknowledged the outgoing Chair's outstanding commitment for the past three years, and thanked their partners and the Secretariat for their support. The 2023 Conference is tentatively scheduled for July 2023.
38. Members expressed their sincere gratitude to Cook Islands for its contribution as Chair of the OCO Annual Conference and Steering Committee, and welcomed FSM as the new OCO Chair.