

## SPREP in Samoa

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### Background to SPREP

SPREP's origin goes back to a workshop on conservation held in 1969 in Noumea, New Caledonia, where strong support was voiced for a regional environment conservation organization. Subsequently, a small one man conservation based program, was established in 1973 at the South Pacific Commission (now the Pacific Community). As regional awareness grew, the volume and gravity of environmental problems in the islands that needed urgent attention all increased. Hence, a regional Ministerial Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific was held in Cook Islands in 1982 to develop an Action Plan for Managing the Natural resources and Environment of the Region. The Meeting not only adopted an Action Plan but it also established a South Pacific Regional Environment Programme to operate as an autonomous unit in the SPC. In 1992, at the invitation of the Government of Samoa, SPREP relocated to temporary headquarters at Vaitele to operate and complete its evolution to an independent inter-governmental organization. This was concluded in June 1993 with the signature of the SPREP Agreement here in Apia. SPREP has 25 members, 21 Pacific island countries and territories (PICTs) and 4 developed countries. Its work programme however is targeted solely for the benefit of PICTs.

In 1996, the Government of Samoa leased to SPREP, at peppercorn rent, a prime site of 10 acres at Vailima for its Headquarters. In the same year the Government of Samoa also executed a Headquarters Agreement conferring formally, conventional diplomatic privileges and immunities befitting an intergovernmental organization and its operations. And in 2000, with donations from some of its members and other donors a modern headquarters was constructed and completed at its premises at Vailima.



SPREP New Headquarters at Vailima

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### **SPREP purpose**

As can be gauged from the above historical background, SPREP is an environmental conservation/protection organization. In its founding Agreement (1993), its members declared that the Purposes of SPREP “**are to promote cooperation in the South Pacific region and to provide assistance in order to protect and improve its environment and to ensure sustainable development for present and future generations**”. How does the Secretariat conduct this work? SPREP carries out this mandate largely through coordinating regional actions, promoting conservation and best practices, facilitating regional and national actions and the provision of advisory and technical assistance to PICTs to help them address environmental problems and concerns. The major focus of SPREP in delivering its programmes to PICTs is to build capacity in the islands and to improve the lot of Pacific islanders at the basic level.

### **The Environment and the Region**

While it is generally held, that our Pacific ancestors, in pre-modern times existed in harmony with their environment and surroundings, this of course, is no longer the case anywhere in the Pacific islands. There are now a lot more Pacific islanders. Their needs and aspirations can no longer be satisfied with what their natural environment provides. To satisfy our modern needs and tastes we create or import a lot of materials that not only benefit us but also harm our environment and surroundings and destroy the natural environmental resources we depend on and which future generations will need for a good and meaningful existence.

Because of the smallness, isolation and general lack of capacity of our islands, it is not easy or even feasible for us individually to address or remedy the problems we have created or imposed on us by need or circumstance. But together as a region we can do this and learn from each other. That was what led to the creation of SPREP.

### **SPREP and Samoa**

Consistent with it being an intergovernmental organization, SPREP’s links to and interactions with its Pacific island members is through Government designated official focal points. This is not to say that SPREP does not deal or work with NGOs or other international agencies which form one of SPREP’s important network of partners and collaborating institutions.

For Samoa, SPREP’s official relations are conducted mainly through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. On more technical matters SPREP is more directly accessible to other government organs, the private sector, NGOs and civil society.

The nature of SPREP’s assistance to Samoa, in particular the environment area, has evolved over the last 10 years that it has been in Samoa. In the earlier years, SPREP has been much more involved in what might be called implementation activities – helping local staff with project implementation. Since then, Samoa has become one of the most fortunate and developed island members in terms of environmental awareness. Trained and skilled local people with more environment dedicated resources from the government have been able to carry out direct implementation work with external assistance from organizations such as SPREP being confined more to the areas of resourcing, advisory and technical backstopping support than direct implementation.

SPREP assists Samoa in a variety of areas through different organs (governmental and non-governmental) and through different modes. But naturally most of this collaboration and assistance is through the MNRE. While, most of SPREP's work programmes are regional in nature it is also national and expected that through sheer proximity and hence accessibility, the host country would stand to benefit more than the others – and Samoa does.

SPREP also assists Samoa through a wide spectrum of projects – for example, assistance with solid waste disposal system (landfill), water catchment protection, ozone depleting substances removal, conservation area support, invasive species control and eradication, environmental planning, marine protected areas, marine pollution, emergency planning and control, meteorological assistance, environment and educational assistance, and environmental information collection and dissemination to name a few.

Having said that, the more easily quantifiable and greatest although less visible effect of SPREP's presence in Samoa, is economic and financial. This results from the simple fact that SPREP is based and operated in Samoa. In recent years, SPREP spent USD\$9million or SAT\$29million annually on its operations. Most of that money is spent or invested in Samoa. This significant financial injection into the Samoan economy comes via employment (about 60% of SPREP's 67 staff are Samoans), spending and investment by employees, services and supplies to the organization, travel and transport spending, tax, pension and residential rental and the likes.

The above is not to suggest that SPREP does not benefit from its location in Samoa. As indicated earlier, when SPREP's expansion could no longer be housed by the SPC in Noumea, Samoa was canvassed for interest and it responded with an offer. It provided temporary facilities to house SPREP, donated land and entered into an agreement to assure the independence of SPREP and all necessary facilities and services to ensure an effective operation in Samoa. Samoa is a secure and safe location, central and easily accessible to the region and the wide world with the necessary support and service facilities and infrastructure to enable the organisation to serve its regional mandate in a cost effective and efficient manner. SPREP looks forward to continuing this partnership with Samoa so that it can better serve the Pacific islands region and at the same time be a good corporate and civil member of the Apia community.