



FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

22 - 23 July 2025

Suva, FIJI

**AGENDA ITEM 5: MINISTERIAL WORKING GROUP OF FISHERIES AND
ECONOMIC MINSTERS**

Purpose and Recommendations

Purpose

This paper presents an update on the Forum Economic Ministers 2024 tasking to the Secretariat, to assess the feasibility of establishing a joint Economic and Fisheries Ministers Working Group.

Summary

In 2024 Forum Economic Ministers emphasised the importance of measures that support solutions for regional economic and development challenges, and that augment national capacities. Ministers also acknowledged the importance of opportunities that can enhance regional economic integration and unlock the full potential of fisheries returns.

In this connection, Ministers called for the Secretariat to work with the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) to undertake initial assessments relating to the establishment of a joint Working Group on Fisheries Development, comprising of Forum Economic Ministers and Forum Fisheries Ministers. It is envisaged that the Working Group will explore innovative ways to increase economic benefits from fisheries revenue, through greater participation in the global fisheries value chain, and the diversification of revenues sources.

2. The FFA developed a Draft Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Ministerial Working Group, and this was presented to the Forum Fisheries Committee Ministerial Meeting (FFCMIN), and the Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM) in Niue in May 2025. The FFCMIN directed the FFA to work with the Forum Secretariat to further develop the TOR, in consultation with Fisheries and Economic Officials, for further consideration by the FEMM and the FFCMIN.

A. Problem/Opportunity Identification

The Pacific region is at a critical juncture where economic resilience and the sustainable management of its vast ocean resources must be pursued in tandem. Fisheries remain the economic backbone for many Pacific nations, contributing significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment, and the food security of many Forum Island Countries (FICs). As a collective, FICs manage over 20% of the world's tuna catch, which provides valuable economic development opportunities and is intrinsically linked to the Pacific's cultural identity. However, growing global competition, climate-induced changes in the migratory pattern of fish stocks, declining returns from traditional fisheries access agreements, and limited value-added opportunities, have exposed structural vulnerabilities in how Pacific fisheries contribute to long-term development.

3. At the same time, Ministries of Finance face increasing pressure to innovatively finance development needs amidst constrained fiscal space and heightened global economic volatility. Despite its strategic value, Fisheries is often underutilised as a lever for sustained domestic revenue generation, economic diversification, and community resilience.

4. The current institutional arrangement between Economic Ministers and Fisheries Ministers, lacks coherent policymaking, integrated investment strategies, and strengthened economic returns from the fisheries sector. There is an urgent need for a unified platform for collaboration and action, to ensure that FICs capitalise on one of the region's most valuable and renewable economic assets.

B. Background

5. To date, there are two key ministerial-level meetings dedicated to Pacific fisheries. These are the Forum Fisheries Committee Ministers Meeting (FFCMIN) and the Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM), both of which are convened by the FFA and the Pacific Community (SPC). The FFCMIN has been convened 23 times, while the RFMM has only met on five occasions. These ministerial platforms serve as critical avenues for regional collaboration, enabling Pacific Fisheries Ministers to deliberate on strategic priorities, and address emerging challenges affecting the region's fisheries sector.

6. The FEMM is a standing Forum meeting that has, to date, met 26 times. Held annually, it serves as a dedicated platform for Economic Ministers to engage on regional economic initiatives that support and advance Forum Member's shared development aspirations, while complementing national priorities and strategies.

7. Economic Ministers have acknowledged that there are significant, untapped opportunities, to harness greater economic returns from the region's fisheries sector through strengthened regional economic cooperation and integration. They have also reaffirmed the critical importance of fisheries resources to the prosperity of Pacific peoples and have expressed strong support for the ongoing efforts of the FFA and the Secretariat in advancing the East New Britain Initiative (ENBi).

8. The Ministerial Working Group on Fisheries Development would serve as a platform for identifying and promoting innovative approaches to enhance economic benefits from fisheries. This would likely include key issues such as licensing revenues, employment in onshore processing, and foreign exchange earnings including through increased participation

in the global fisheries value chain, revenue diversification, and alignment with the ENBi's ongoing work.

9. At the 2025 Special FEMM, Ministers considered and endorsed the Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development (PRED) and re-affirmed the importance of fisheries as a driver of regional prosperity. Ministers also expressed their support for the ongoing implementation of the ENBi by the Secretariat and the FFA. The PRED provides a valuable and coherent framework to enhance fisheries development, by linking it to infrastructure, trade, private sector engagement, and investment sectors. The Secretariat has notified the FFA of the FEMM decision on the further work required in relation to the proposed Working Group.

10. Whilst acknowledging the 2024 FEMM directive to assess the feasibility of convening a Joint Ministerial Working Group on Fisheries Development, it is also important to take into consideration the ongoing work on the Review of Regional Architecture (RRA) and its potential impacts on this initiative, including the establishment and operationalisation of the Working Group.

C. Consideration by the Forum Fisheries Committee

11. To operationalise the Joint Working Group, Officials of the Forum Fisheries Committee (FFC) tasked the FFA and the Secretariat with identifying resources, appropriate timelines and convening modalities, to facilitate the establishment of the Joint Working Group.

D. Current discussions and approach

Scope of the Joint Ministerial Working Group and its Potential Value-Add

12. The Working Group presents a strategic opportunity to institutionalise high-level collaboration between Economic and Fisheries Ministers, recognising that the sustainable and equitable development of the region's fisheries sector is both a fisheries management policy issue, as well as an economic development imperative. With the fisheries sector representing one of the most significant and shared economic assets across the Pacific, there is a clear imperative to ensure sustainable management, to deepen economic returns, enhance regional value chains, and increase national revenue through more deliberate and coordinated policy leadership. By bringing together the custodians of sectoral expertise and macroeconomic planning, this mechanism can strengthen support for the the ENBi, and operationalise a more integrated approach to fisheries development and broader economic goals, in alignment with the 2050 Strategy and the PRED.

13. This collaboration is timely and necessary. The Joint Working Group provides a unique platform to advance coordinated policy development that not only protects and sustains marine resources but also unlocks its full economic potential. It offers a structured process for dialogue on value-addition, infrastructure development, and inclusive growth. These are cross-cutting areas that require joint political leadership from both economic and fisheries portfolios in order to deliver outcomes that are impactful, equitable and future-focused.

14. Furthermore, the Working Group can serve as a mechanism for coordinated regional advocacy, to progress the monitoring of shared priorities, to enhance policy coherence between sectoral plans and broader regional economic strategies, and for resource mobilisation. By aligning fisheries development with fiscal planning, trade and investment frameworks, and

community-level development goals, this collaboration holds potential to transform fisheries from a natural asset into a driver of sustainable, inclusive, and resilient, economic growth. As FICs continue to navigate complex economic and environmental challenges, this integrated ministerial engagement provides a bold and pragmatic pathway for maximising socio-economic benefits from one of the region's most vital resources.

Proposed Approach to the Development of the Draft Terms of Reference

15. To ensure clear responsibilities and agreed reporting pathways, a TOR for the Ministerial Working Group will be developed in consultation with both Fisheries and Economic Officials, for the consideration of the respective Ministerial meetings.

16. The TOR will discuss and include the timing for the convening of the Ministerial Working Group. A range of options on the same are outlined below:

- (i) Convening of the Joint Ministerial Working Group in the margins of the Forum Fisheries Committee Ministerial or the Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting; or
- (ii) Convening the Joint Ministerial Working Group either immediately prior to or after the FEMM; or
- (iii) Convening the Joint Ministerial Working Group at a time that follows a meeting of the ENBi Working Group.

E. Resourcing Requirements

17. It is expected that the physical meetings of the Joint Ministerial Working Group will be resource intensive and would need to be appropriately budgeted for by the Secretariat and the FFA. In this regard, the Secretariat and the FFA will need to explore resourcing options that can be made available to support the activities of the Working Group.

F. Next Steps

18. The Secretariat will work with the FFA to further develop of the Draft TOR and will continue to keep Members and stakeholders updated on the progress of this work.

*Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
Suva, Fiji
18 July 2025*