

SOPAC Secretariat, 15.00hr, 31st March 2010

Signing Ceremony

Regional Institutional Framework (RIF) reform process transfers SOPAC functions into SPC and SPREP

Remarks from Director SOPAC Dr Russell Howorth

Representatives of Member Countries, CROP colleagues (Forum Secretary General, SPC Director General, SPREP Deputy Director, Staff of SOPAC Staff of SPC, friends.....Let me first welcome you all to the SOPAC Secretariat this afternoon to witness this Signing Ceremony as part of the Regional Institutional Framework (RIF) reform process as a result of which we will action the transfer SOPAC functions into SPC and SPREP.

I would like to call on Deputy Director General of SPC (Suva) Fekita Utoikamanu to bless this occasion with a short prayer.

I was invited to present a history of SOPAC to the delegates attending the STAR Meeting held in close association with the last SOPAC Meeting in Port Vila and ended with a quote from Shakespeare:

*“Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head...”
(Shakespeare, As You Like It, Act 2 Scene 1)*

Or as I would paraphrase, whilst the circumstance may look adverse, there remains a distinct prospect for a worthwhile and valuable outcome.

The RIF reform process is like a lens, there are many ways to look through it and the perspective from each vantage point may not always be the same. Likewise a SWOT analysis that attempts to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of whatever is being examined. A good strategic planner will always respond to the challenge of turning threats into opportunities. So we must look at the RIF process as an opportunity to find Shakespeare’s “precious jewel”.

The road to today has been certainly a long one and at times a tough one. The journey for some commenced several years ago and frustration amongst some is evident. To many here today and certainly the 9 SOPAC staff directly involved they are relative newcomers and likely wondering what all the fuss is about.

Despite all of this we are I believe today at a watershed in the journey. A watershed not often visited in the region, in that today marks a point of real change. From today SPC will be the clear lead CROP organisation/focal point for ICT support to members and also Energy. SPREP will further consolidate its lead role amongst CROP in supporting members in regard to climate-related matters. The SOPAC Secretariat for its part under instruction from the Forum Leaders and its Governing Council is as of today divesting itself of all functions directly related to these areas of work.

We have been proud of the role we have played, and we will continue our support role to SPC and SPREP in the true spirit of cooperation amongst CROP organisations as described in the CROP Charter.

Associated with the transfer of the ICT Outreach functions are two staff, and for Energy seven staff. I am satisfied that the arrangements for their transfer have been thoroughly dealt with. They have all signed a contract with SPC which at least ensures they enjoy similar remuneration and terms and conditions as they have enjoyed at SOPAC. They have in turn agreed to relinquish their SOPAC contract. For me this is the key element of the transfer as without the staff, without them being taken due care of, there will almost certainly be disruption to service delivery of the work programme to members. Something that must not happen. I take this opportunity to wish the staff well in the new and challenging work environment at SPC

The Letters of Agreement for the transfer and integration of functions from SOPAC to SPC and SPREP also address a number of issues other than staffing. Foremost in the minds of island members is the need to protect intellectual property which is held on their behalf. Foremost in the minds of corporate services are matters related to finances and assets.

It is my view that it is really of no consequence to argue whether or not the LOAs are legally binding. The LOAs have been drafted in the true spirit of regional cooperation and are in every sense consistent with previous practice in the region. I suggest this must be considered best practice and as binding as need be. That is the yardstick by which the LOAs will be measured.

Before I finish I would like to point out that this is not the end of the RIF road. The next and immediate challenges ahead are to deal with the Core SOPAC Work Programme. Fortunately there are now the lessons learnt from the recent past, and armed with these I feel confident that the necessary arrangements can be made for SOPAC Council to deal confidently and decisively with the transfer of the Core to SPC in its meeting in Nadi in late October with a view to full and effective transfer on 1 January 2011. Once the transfer and integration of the Core Work programme to become the new Applied Science and Technology Division of SPC is dealt with, the outstanding matter will be to deal with the closure of SOPAC the Commission within the context of its legal intergovernmental agreement.

To achieve all of what needs to be accomplished in the time available I want to make a plea. It is crucial the Secretariat has the full support of all its members and partners. The SOPAC work programme has built up over the years to a very credible and internationally recognised vehicle to deliver science and technology advice to its island members. Speaking frankly and amongst stakeholders it would be remiss of me if I did not highlight the current difficulties the SOPAC work programme is facing. Council met only four weeks ago to address these difficulties but were not able to resolve them. If we are not diligent the vehicle will arrive at the end of the road on 1 January 2011 but by that time the Rolls Royce will be without wheels and maybe not even an engine. Forty years of effort building the SOPAC Core Work Programme will be at severe risk or even wasted.

The opportunity to grasp the “precious jewel” will have been lost.

I thank you.