

## Papua New Guinea's emergent longline fishery

Two Hawaii-based fishing vessels are currently participating in the longline fishery in Papua New Guinea (PNG), in the south west tropical Pacific. The two vessels, which fish in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands for lobsters are on charter in PNG between lobster fishing seasons. PNG is one of the largest Pacific nations, straddling Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, with one of the largest EEZs in the region and abundant tuna resources. Like the rest of the Pacific, PNG is keen to expand its longline fishing industry for the lucrative fresh tuna market in Japan.

Fishing trials in 1994 and 1995 in Rabaul, Finchaven and the capital city, Port Moresby, demonstrated the feasibility of a domestic fishery in PNG; although the productivity of the resource was evident from the long history of fishing in PNG waters by Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese longliners. From 1994 onwards various local companies began to establish fishing operations at various ports throughout the country, but with most activity centered around Port Moresby. A longline fishery management plan was developed by the National Fisheries Authority in 1995, which included a ban on foreign longliners operating in the PNG EEZ. Licensing guidelines were also introduced which included a minimum of 51% PNG equity in joint ventures, and short-term charter of foreign vessels to PNG companies on a 1:1 basis with the number of local vessels in a company fleet.

Presently there are 20 longliners operating in PNG, with the majority of vessels being based in Port Moresby. Fishing companies outside of the capital include one in Alotau and the two others in PNG's second city Lae. The Alotau company has four vessels and has tried but not yet succeeded in marketing fish to Japan via Australia. The two Lae fishing companies have a boat apiece and supply fish to domestic markets. One of the Port Moresby based companies tried establishing an operation in the northern town of Wewak, with its own aircraft to export the fish to Japan, but this venture was not a success.

Vessels based in Port Moresby fish along the south Papuan coast from Kerema in the west to Milne Bay in the east. Catch rates typically average about 700 - 1,102 lbs/1000 hooks, with sets averaging about 1200 hooks. The catch composition is about 40-45% albacore, 40-45% yellowfin tuna and 10-15% bigeye tuna. The bigeye and yellowfin tuna are marketed mainly in Japan, with prices for both species from PNG currently in the region of 800 -/kg. PNG bigeye and yellowfin tuna are not greatly esteemed in Japan, where they are said to be low in fat and with flesh that has a poor color. The large volume of albacore in the catch is something of a problem for the PNG longliners as it commands a lower price in Japan (150-350 -/kg) which would not even cover the freight costs. The most viable option for albacore may be to freeze it and sell it to canneries for processing.

The concentration of vessels fishing from Port Moresby is due to the capital having the only international airport with a runway long enough to accommodate large passenger aircraft with substantial freight capacity. The largest aircraft flying on domestic routes in PNG are Fokker F28s which are

limited in the amount of freight they can carry. Typically, they can only accommodate five sashimi grade tunas when packed in boxes . This compounds the level of difficulty in exporting fish from towns other than Port Moresby, where fishing companies are competing with other businesses for the limited cargo space available.

Longline ventures in Wewak, Lae, Kimbe, Rabaul, Kavieng and even Port Moresby have all failed due to freight costs and logistical problems. Domestic freight costs are similar to export freight charges and there is little likelihood of this changing. While this situation persists productive fishing grounds north of Port Moresby in the Bismark and Solomon Seas will likely remain unexploited by domestic longliners. Further, the South Papuan coastal area is subject to strong southeasterly trade winds for about 9 months of the year, making fishing difficult, and may be brushed by cyclones which pass to the south through the Solomon Islands. Other constraints for the PNG longline fishery include the limited number of skilled personnel to crew ships and handle fresh tuna, high operating costs especially for fuel, problems obtaining water and ice, wharf space, local politics, and an indifferent government bureaucracy.

In conclusion the development of the PNG longline fishery has been one of mixed success. The country now has a wholly locally owned domestic longline fleet, but the development of this industry has not been easy and several of the companies that initially began fishing later went bankrupt. The logistics of getting fish out of the country to the premier market in Japan will continue to be the major constraint on the industry, and may require dedicated freight aircraft to move fish from provincial towns to the capital. Persons interested in knowing more about the PNG longline fishery should contact Maurice Brownjohn, Chairman of the PNG Fishing Industry Association. Mr Brownjohn can be reached at The Net Shop, PO Bx 5860 Boroko, NCD, PNG, fax: (675) 325 8994 or email: [netshop1@daltron.com.pg](mailto:netshop1@daltron.com.pg).