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*The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.*

## CIRCULAR

**FILE:** AP 1/1; SPREP 4/1/5  
**DATE:** 11 June 2012  
**CIRCULAR:** 12/45

**TO:** SPREP National Focal Points  
Collaborating & Institutional Focal  
Points  
CROP

**SUBJECT: SPEECH BY SPREP DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR SPREP OPEN DAY, 8 JUNE 2012.**

Dear SPREP Members and Partners,

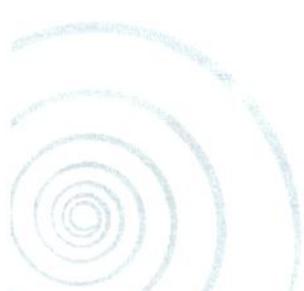
Please find attached for your information a copy of my opening speech at the function at SPREP Headquarters on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012, commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of SPREP arriving in Samoa.

Please let me know if you would like more information or clarification regarding this important milestone for SPREP.

Kind regards,

David Sheppard  
Director General

DS/rmg



## **OPENING SPEECH – 20th ANNIVERSARY OF SPREP ARRIVING IN SAMOA**

**DAVID SHEPPARD, DIRECTOR GENERAL, SPREP**

**8th June, 2012**

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Honourable Pastor

Honourable Prime Minister of Samoa

Cabinet Ministers of the Government of Samoa

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

SPREP Staff, past and present

Ladies and gentlemen

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Thank you for joining with us today for this happy occasion.

At the outset I would like to thank our generous hosts - the Government of Samoa for all they have done to support SPREP in Samoa. We are deeply appreciative of this support over the last 20 years. Thanks you, Faafetai Lava.

I would to particularly thank the Prime Minister for honoring us with his presence today and for making time in his busy schedule to attend this Opening Ceremony. Prime Minister, I'm sure the tree you plant today in our tree planting ceremony will thrive and will put down deep roots, just as SPREP has over the 20 years since arriving on these beautiful shores.

Today, we celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of SPREP moving to Samoa and 40 years of our existence. That is a lot of candles on a birthday cake, and is certainly very much older than all of the ladies at SPREP. I can see a lot of nodding of heads from our SPREP ladies.

However, like a good wine, I think we are getting better with age.

SPREP is the premier organisation for the environment in the Pacific. We recognize that the environment is the cornerstone of sustainable development in the Pacific as clearly articulated in the SPREP Vision which is:

*“The Pacific Environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures”*

We have all appreciated and enjoyed the celebration of Samoa’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence over the last week. In fact it has been very difficult to get back to work this week after such a great party, or series of parties.

SPREP joins with others to offer our warmest and most sincere congratulations to the Government and people of Samoa on reaching this important milestone.

Many of us saw the Vakas, or sailing canoes, when they sailed into Apia harbor last week. Their crews told us exciting tales of adventure as they sailed across the Pacific.

Like the Vakas, SPREP has been on a long voyage in the Pacific and we also have many exciting tales of adventure.

SPREP’s voyage started 40 years ago in Noumea, New Caledonia where we were established as a small programme within the SPC – the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Then, 20 years ago, we voyaged to Samoa to become the regions newest and smallest regional organisation.

The last few years we have been looking to the future – addressing issues such as where is SPREP heading and how do we get there, particularly through the development and implementation of our Strategic Plan – the chart for our future voyage in the Pacific.

We have been sharply focused on improving our level of support to the Island Members of SPREP, the 21 island countries and territories of the Pacific.

I am pleased SPREP has more than doubled our direct financial and technical support to these Members over the last 3 years.

We will continue and accelerate these efforts.

Occasions like today offer a good opportunity to look back and to learn the lessons of history.

SPREP has been around a long time. Our origins date to a Regional Conference on Conservation of Nature in 1969 which recommended the recruitment of a regional ecological adviser.

It took a while to move this recommendation forward – some things don't change – and SPREP started as a small programme in July 1972, within the SPC - in their old headquarters in Noumea built by the US military during World War II.

This building no longer exists but it was a special structure, steeped in the history of our region.

After discussions with Maurice Strong, the Director of UNEP, in 1974, plans evolved to hold a "mini-Stockholm" Pacific regional conference on the human environment and prepare a regional environment programme. Stockholm was the first of the so called Earth Summits that have been held every 10 years since 1992, with the latest to be held in Rio starting next week.

I am pleased that SPREP continues to have a close relationship with UNEP and that I will be signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Executive Director of UNEP, Achim Steiner, at the Rio+20 meeting next week.

This will build on and strengthen our joint work in the Pacific region

SPREP started to gain traction in the 1970's and there were some challenges in deciding who the parent should be.

Both SPC and the Pacific Islands Forum wanted SPREP, and UNEP also made a move to grab it.

It was nice to feel wanted.

Finally, a Coordinating Group of all organisations was established, with the Forum CEO as Chair and Arthur Dahl as the one person secretariat.

In the early 1980's SPREP had doubled our staff – by then we had 2 staff - one focused on marine biodiversity, particularly coral reef management, and one focused on terrestrial management, particularly the establishment of protected areas.

Things started to move with SPREP in the late 1980's with the appointment of Joe Reti and then Vili Fuavo as SPREP Coordinators.

At this time there was considerable discussion regarding moving SPREP from a programme of SPC to an independent regional organisation. Like any birth there are always nervous

moments but we were fortunate for the guidance of wise men and women from many Pacific Islands to steer us through this process, including Robin Yarrow from Fiji, Sione Tongilava from Tonga, and Kilifoti Eteuati from Foreign Affairs in Samoa.

After lengthy discussions over this matter, including over the location, with Tonga, Fiji and Samoa under consideration as a host country, the decision was taken at the highest political levels to establish SPREP as a separate regional organisation, based in Apia, with Vili Fuavao as the first SPREP Director.

SPREP moved to Samoa in 1992 and was established as an independent inter-governmental organisation with the signing of the SPREP Agreement in Apia on 16 June, 1993.

The move to Samoa from New Caledonia was not without its challenges as SPREP staff, including Vili, Don Stuart, Joe Reti, Gerald Miles, Paul Holthus, Neva Wendt and myself arrived in the wake of cyclones Ofa in 1990 and Val in 1991.

I remember there were mixed views in the Secretariat about moving so quickly to Samoa after the two major cyclones. But Vili, to his credit, said – *“we move and we move now - we must demonstrate our support and solidarity with Samoa at this difficult time”*.

Vili, you made the right decision.

Neva Wendt has been part of the history of SPREP from the very early days and was famous as she left SPREP a number of times at the conclusion of her contract but she always returned, thus earning her the nickname “Never Went”.

In fact a feature of SPREP is that staff leave but they do keep coming back, including Sefa, Jill, Neville, Selesitina, myself and many more. There is something addictive about this place.

Another feature is that some staff don't leave – and we are happy that some of the original crew with us 20 years ago are still with us today. Lupe, Monica, Apiseta, Tolo – please stand up so we can show our appreciation for your efforts for SPREP over such a long time.

SPREP first set up shop in Samoa's industrial zone of Vaitele in the old office for the Samoa Copra and Cocoa Boards. The large building at the back was used for drying copra and still had the drying kilns when we took over. The whole compound smelled of copra when we first moved in, and so did we after a few weeks !

However, we all appreciated the proximity to the Vailima brewery.

In 1996 the Govt of Samoa leased 10 acres of land at Vailima to SPREP with the lease being “for as long as SPREP remains in Samoa”. The land used to be part of the Vailima Botanical Garden which surrounds the Robert Louis Stevenson museum - the former official residence of Samoa’s Head of State.

I’m sure if Robert Louis Stevenson was still alive he would have appreciated having SPREP as a neighbour as many of his writings displays an environmental bent, as shown in a quote from one of his works, where he says:

*It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air, that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.*

In 2000, SPREP, with financial assistance of some members and other donors, constructed and moved into its premises at Vailima. The Prime Minister opened the building at a celebration here on 8 August, 2000 and it is fantastic to have him back here today to celebrate our 20 years in Samoa.

Joe Reti remembers the Opening Ceremony. In his words:

*“What I remember best is the opening ceremony. There was so much to do in very little time. The car park was tar-sealed the same day and this was supposed to be the site for the opening ceremony including entertainment by the Teachers Cultural Group of Samoa. Tents were hastily put up and a 6 inch high platform for the dancing was just completed before the guests arrived. The funny part of this was that the Cultural Group could hardly fit the dancers on the platform and the rest of the Group had to sit on the newly tar-sealed car park with their newly prepared uniforms. There were several black dots on backsides that night but the drinks were flowing freely and not many people were too concerned perhaps until they got home to their spouses”*

SPREP has been fortunate to have been guided by a number of excellent Directors after we became an independent organisation, in particular Vili Fuavao, and then Tamari’i Tutangata, and Asterio Takesy. I am humbled to be standing in their shadows, and pay tribute to their guiding of the SPREP Va’a through what have at times been turbulent seas, such as the extreme, even cyclonic, weather conditions we experienced during the Regional Institutional Framework process 4 to 5 years ago.

Over the last 20 years, the trees in our compound have grown and SPREP itself has grown significantly, with currently around 70 staff with an increasing budget.

We are happy to be shifting from a SPREP compound to a SPREP Campus, and to be able to welcome friends and colleagues from many partner organisations, to work with us here, such as JICA's waste management team, the Australian climate adaptation team, and staff from GIZ in Germany.

We welcome you all to the SPREP family with open arms – thanks you for joining our Pacific voyage

SPREP now covers a wide range of areas, including climate change, waste management and pollution control, biodiversity and ecosystem management, and environmental monitoring and governance.

We have grown, but so have the environmental challenges. It is sobering to note that our precious biodiversity – vital for life in this region - is highly at risk.

We are pleased to be starting up new programmes this year on invasive species and island biodiversity but we have a long way to go to address the challenge of biodiversity loss.

Pacific leaders, including the Prime Minister of Samoa have consistently told the international community that climate change is the most important challenge facing our Pacific region. SPREP has been at the forefront of efforts to help Pacific countries adapt to climate change, including through the landmark PACC – Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change – project.

SPREP has been pleased and honored to partner with UNDP on PACC and are pleased that the PACC project is expanding with support from Australia and the US.

Waste management and pollution control are also major issues for our region and for SPREP.

The Vaka crews that came into Apia harbor last week told us about some of the less exciting aspects of their trip such as sailing for days through huge areas of garbage, mostly discarded plastic, in parts of the Pacific. In particular there is an area referred to as the Great Plastic Garbage Patch in the northern Pacific which is a concentration of plastics, chemical sludge and other debris that have been trapped by an ocean current called the North Pacific Gyre.

This is a symptom, an alarming symptom, and we must do much more to address the root causes. I urge countries and all of you individually to join with SPREP in our Clean Pacific 2012 Campaign which aims to galvanize actions at all levels to improve our management of wastes and pollution in the Pacific region.

The many programmes and activities of SPREP are on display around our campus today. After the opening ceremony and the cake, we invite you all to wander around, look at our displays and talk to our staff, ask any questions – SPREP staff are very easy to spot !. If you would also like to get involved in any of our programmes please feel free.

What lessons can we take from this trip down memory lane.

First, the importance of having a dedicated, motivated and professional staff at SPREP is fundamental to our success and long term viability. I would like to recognize and thank all SPREP staff – past and present - for their hard work in support of efforts in the countries of this region to ensure a better environment. SPREP's many achievements over many years reflect the hard work and professionalism of our team.

I was asked on Radio Australia last week about what I was most proud of at SPREP over the last 20 years. This was a tough one as we have many achievements and it's very hard to make a call.

What I finally said was that I was proud SPREP has made a major contribution to building capacity in many Pacific countries to better manage the environment and better address key challenges such as climate change and waste.

In particular I am very happy that many staff from SPREP have returned to their home countries to senior positions of leadership, such as Frank Wickham, the recently appointed Secretary of Agriculture in the Solomon Islands, and Frank Griffin in Papua New Guinea.

SPREP is about people and all SPREP staff from whatever time will always remain part of the SPREP family

Second, SPREP would not be the organisation we are without the generosity of our hosts, the Government of Samoa. Not only do we appreciate being hosted here, but we also appreciate the opportunity to learn from the practical experience of Samoa in managing its environment

We have seen how Samoa has developed Pacific Solutions to Pacific Issues – through approaches such as developing use of coconut based bio-diesel, which will shortly be fuelling SPREP vehicles, including my own, and your other important work on renewable energy and natural resource management, to name but a few.

Samoa is a leader in the Pacific in the environmental field and we are pleased to work with and learn from you.

Thank you most sincerely to the Government and people of Samoa for making our stay here in your beautiful country so welcoming, so interesting and so enjoyable.

Third, I would also like to acknowledge the many that support SPREP. A glimpse through our latest Annual Report shows that more than 40 donors and supporters have contributed to SPREP to make the Pacific environment a healthy and sustainable one. I would particularly like to thank the Governments of Australia and New Zealand who are our largest programmatic supports. Thank you very much to all donors and partners, we appreciate your trust and we will work hard to earn it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for sharing this important and happy occasion today with myself and with SPREP staff.

Thank you.

Fa'afetai lava.