

Australia and the Resilient Pacific Islands

By Ms. Andrea Gleason

The Pacific is Australia's region and home—we are a member of the Pacific family and a proud founding member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Australia's priority is to ensure the Blue Pacific remains peaceful, prosperous, and equipped to respond to the challenges of our time.

Australia is bringing new energy and more resources to the Pacific to help build a stronger and more united Pacific family and elevate Pacific voices on issues that matter to the region. We are committed to working in lockstep with the PIF to support Pacific priorities, guided by the *Pacific Way* and by ambitions articulated in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. We are reliable, transparent, and open, and we respect the sovereignty and the centrality of regional institutions.

Ms. Andrea Gleason, Australian Consul-General in Honolulu, explains that Australia is "a member of the Pacific family and a proud founding member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Australia's priority is to ensure the Blue Pacific remains peaceful, prosperous, and equipped to respond to the challenges of our time."

Over the past 12 months, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Honorable Penny Wong, and Minister for International Development and the Pacific, the Honorable Pat Conroy (member of parliament), have visited every PIF member to renew our partnerships and listen to Pacific priorities. We understand that regional unity and a strong, united PIF are central to protecting our shared interests in a peaceful, prosperous, and resilient region—we are stronger together.

In response to the priorities of the region, the Australian Government announced a suite of measures for the Pacific in May 2023 (a 1.9 billion Australian dollar [AUD] investment over five years). These measures include:

- expanding access to Australian media content and boosting media connections in the region;
- improving visa service delivery;
- building on our shared love of sport and other interests;
- expanding and improving the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme;
- boosting our investment in Pacific regional architecture to support the Pacific family; and
- advancing Pacific peace and security priorities, including the areas of defense, law enforcement, and criminal justice.

Australia recognizes that climate change is the single greatest threat to Pacific communities. That is why we are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Pacific to face the climate crisis.

Australia is taking meaningful action at home and in partnership with the Pacific. Our increased domestic effort includes a commitment to reduce emissions by 43% below 2005 levels by 2030, to reach net zero emissions by 2050, and to generate 82% of energy from renewables by 2030.

This is complemented by support for the Pacific to build climate change and disaster resilience. Australia is committed to delivering at least AUD 700 million in climate finance to the Pacific and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure across the region, including through the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific.

To amplify Pacific voices in international climate discussions and highlight climate challenges and vulnerabilities in the Pacific, Australia is bidding to co-host the 31st UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP31) in partnership with the Pacific. Together, we hope to accelerate global climate ambition, implementation, and investment.

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With plastic pollution a significant problem across the Pacific, Australia is also supporting Pacific Island countries in preparing for and participating in negotiations for a global treaty on plastic pollution. Last year, at the 5th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, 175 countries, including Australia, agreed to develop a global treaty to address the full life cycle of plastic. The second round of negotiations will be held in November 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the Pacific, including people-to-people connections across the region. To help reinforce these bonds, Australia is expanding its education and training, employment, sports, media, cultural and church partnerships.

Australia has a renewed focus on Pacific education and skills. Education is a priority sector and integral to the Pacific's recovery from the pandemic and natural disasters. Investments include bilateral support to Pacific education systems, with a focus on primary education and teacher training. We have longstanding relationships with regional partners, including the University of the South Pacific, the Pacific Community, and the Australia Pacific Training Coalition. Highly valued Australian scholarship and mobility programs, including the Australia Awards, build human capital and enable Australia's university and vocational education and training sector to grow regional institutional connections.

Australia is also expanding and improving the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. This temporary migration program delivers jobs for Pacific and Timor-Leste workers, enabling them to develop skills, earn income, and support their families back home while helping to fill labor gaps in Australia. At the close of June 2023, there were over 39,600 Pacific and Timor-Leste workers in Australia.

The Australian Government has announced the Pacific Engagement Visa, a permanent resident visa program to increase permanent migration from the Pacific and Timor-Leste, strengthening people-to-people links and encouraging greater cultural, business, and educational exchange. Up to 3,000 visas will be allocated through a ballot process across participating countries each year.

Australia and the Pacific family also share a love of sport. Through *PacificAus Sports*, Australia is helping to develop pathways for Pacific teams and athletes to compete in elite competitions and increase access to high-performance coaching in Australia and internationally.

The United States, more broadly, has longstanding ties with the Pacific. Moreover, US engagement with regional priorities has seen a significant increase recently, a shift that promises long-term benefits to Pacific peoples. Australia welcomes this development. At the Australia-US Ministerial Meeting (AUSMIN) on 28 July 2023, Australia and the United States emphasized their commitment to the Pacific, including:

- to work with Partners in the Blue Pacific partners towards delivering initiatives on climate action, cyber capacity-building, and humanitarian warehousing;
- to pursue further joint financing for sustainable, resilient infrastructure in the region;
- to jointly expand support for Pacific law enforcement and justice sector actors in accordance with the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Australia is committed to working together in partnership with the Pacific towards a peaceful, prosperous, and resilient region.

We will continue to work with the United States and other partners to support Pacific priorities.

More information on Australia's engagement with the Pacific is at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific>.

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