



Office of the Prime Minister  
Press Release

## **PRESS RELEASE**

**9 April 2020**

### **Official Statement**

#### **The Cook Islands and Covid-19 – A Comprehensive Response**

To date, the Cook Islands is Covid-19 free with zero positive cases.

Beginning last month, Te Marae Ora / The Cook Islands Ministry of Health started an aggressive testing regime. A total of 588 Covid-19 tests have been sent to the laboratory in New Zealand for testing. Thus far 575 have returned negative results for COVID-19. Thirteen are still pending and an additional 200 tests will be sent to New Zealand on this Friday's flight. The country status is currently CODE YELLOW – which was activated after suspected community transmission in New Zealand. The testing to date represents approximately 7% of the population of Rarotonga (10,690).

As preparations began earlier this year, Rarotonga's sole hospital (which has around 80 beds, and no ICU beds) was repurposed to deal with any positive cases, should that situation unfold. The hospital wards are closed to the public except for emergency admissions and Covid-19 response centres were set up in each of Rarotonga's 10 punas (districts). Orders for additional personal protective equipment (PPE) have been made and we are awaiting delivery.

With two ventilators in the Cook Islands, contingency plans have included the transfer of Covid-19 patients to NZ for further care should the need arise.

Even though the virus has not presented itself, the Cook Islands government has been forthright about the need for physical distancing and other measures to prevent transmission. For full details, please visit: [www.covid19.gov.ck](http://www.covid19.gov.ck)

Apart from preparing the country for Covid-19, the Cook Islands government has allocated significant resources, both in manpower and financially, to deal with the sharp downturn in the economy.

Tourism is the main economic driver of gross domestic product. A total of 171,550 visitors were welcomed in 2019. With all commercial flights cancelled apart from one weekly flight

between Rarotonga and Auckland for the purposes of transporting supplies, the tourism industry has ground to a halt. Following the NZ government's lockdown, no visitors have entered the country in over two weeks. While these provisions are necessary, it has come at a significant cost to many.

The Cook Islands' tourism-led economy is now forecasted to contract 4.4 per cent in 2019/20 in terms of real economic growth. A further 5.9 per cent fall in 2020/21 is expected, based on current assumptions in a fast-changing environment.

Responding to the situation, the Cook Islands government has announced a multi-stage stimulus package valued at \$61 million, which is already funded through a supplementary budget passed in an emergency session of parliament last month. The government is currently in discussions for further aid which would be included in the 2020/2021 budget, which has yet to be tabled in parliament.

Several businesses operating in the tourism sector have made arrangements to shut down during the downturn, with applicable workers and commercial entities being offered financial assistance by the government. Payments have commenced this week and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) is compiling statistics on applications and payouts as the rescue package is rolled out.

For further details on the government's Economic Response Plan, please visit:  
<http://www.mfem.gov.ck/economic-planning/covid-19-economic-response-plan-erp>

The Cook Islands government is planning for a lengthy recovery period and multiple scenarios are being examined for future action and returning to economic growth.

In the meantime, the government is providing assistance to Cook Islanders both at home and abroad.

A number of Cook Islanders are currently in NZ and the government is in active discussion with the government of NZ for their repatriation, which is expected to commence once lockdown requirements in NZ have eased. For demographic statistics (Census 2016, conducted every five years), please visit:  
<http://www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics/census-and-surveys/census/142-census-2016>

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