

Hon. Mr. John Silk
Marshall Islands Minister of Foreign Affairs
UN Oceans Conference
Partnership Roundtable 1: Marine Pollution
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Co-Chairs, Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

This roundtable is an important opportunity to speak to solutions, not problems. Everyone has established our targets through the SDGs – which includes a commitment to sharply reduce marine and coastal pollution. To remind ourselves why, in the Marshall Islands we need only look in our back yard. Some of the world's richest biodiversity is at stake, not to mention our food security and traditional relationship with our own waters.

First, a primary challenge to curbing marine pollution is addressing in-port vessel discharge. We are committed to strengthening local regulations, but it is likely the solution extends beyond our own ports.

This is also a regional challenge – and perhaps at our upcoming regional environmental summit our region should consider common information platforms – capacity to move towards a regional “oil fingerprinting” database and shared regional information networks on confirmed pollution violations which would ultimately place repeat offender vessels in jeopardy of their licenses. Our lessons on fisheries policies show that our region must move together to avoid a “race to the bottom.” Ultimately, vessels who are guests in our waters must be part of the solution and not part of the problem. It is important that partnerships focus on effective implementation, and not use only paper regulations to measure progress. We also welcome the renewed focus in the “call for action” and elsewhere to address marine plastics and discarded gear. And we are pursuing a “blue fee” impact fund, to allocate 3 percent of foreign fishing license fees to tackling marine and coastal pollution, and strengthening our waste and sewage infrastructure.

Second, we are committed to strengthen our national regulation and policies to facilitate effective implementation at local levels. We struggle to reconcile a top-down “command and control” approach with our views on land and decision-making. Ultimately, we must move to create a more visible “culture of compliance” in our local communities and across our nation. These are no mere words – the Marshall Islands has recently banned import and use single-use plastic bags, which are becoming more common on our coasts than fish. It would be interesting to consider what partnership approaches would be needed to upscale this at regional and cross-regional levels.

Third, the Marshall Islands, and many of our Pacific neighbors, struggle with the legacy of historical events which we did not cause. The widespread presence of shipwrecks, unexploded ordnance and radioactive contamination from the World War II and Cold War eras pollute our coastal waters and the

ability to fully address them well outstrips our limited resources and capacity. We can point to some important bilateral progress on the Prinz Eugen wreck – but this is only a small fraction of a much wider problem which cannot be left only to bilateral discussions. The longer the world waits, the wider the problem grows. A focused and outcome-driven international engagement is well overdue.

Co-chairs,

This is only a portion of the global challenge on marine pollution – but we are interested in emphasizing partnerships that produce local results, and build upon our own political will.