‘Pacific Towing’s Solomon Islands Expansion’

Having two tugs in Honiara greatly increases Pacific Towing’s capacity to introduce additional marine services and better support Solomon Islands’ maritime sector.

Pacific Towing (PacTow) is taking further steps to strengthen its presence in Solomon Islands, with plans to expand the range of marine services it can provide from its Honiara base.

Headquartered in Papua New Guinea, the company has provided harbour towage services in Solomon Islands since 2012. Earlier this year, it deployed the ASD tug *Pacific Salvor* to Honiara, adding a second and considerably more powerful tug to its Solomon Islands operation.

Pacific Salvor joined *Kavachi*, a Solomon Islands-flagged tug operated by a Solomon Islander crew. The two vessels now give PacTow greater capacity to support vessel movements at the Port of Honiara, as well as the ability to mobilise to other locations when required, such as Noro Port.

While the expanded towage capability is important, PacTow is also looking beyond its traditional harbour towage role. The company is planning to progressively increase its capacity to provide emergency response activities in Solomon Islands, including pollution prevention, oil-spill containment and clean-up, salvage, and firefighting support for vessels in distress.

PacTow is Melanesia’s only full member of the International Salvage Union (ISU) and is also a member of the International Spill Control Organization (ISCO).

PacTow General Manager Gerard Kasnari said the company’s objective is to make a much needed contribution to the Solomon Islands maritime sector while building its local operations at a sustainable pace.

“PacTow has been part of the Solomon Islands maritime community for more than a decade,” Kasnari said. “Our focus is on strengthening the support we can provide to ports, shipping operators, government agencies and local communities, particularly when an emergency occurs.”

A stronger emergency response presence

The deployment of *Pacific Salvor* to Solomon Islands represents an important increase in emergency response capability. The 50-tonne bollard-pull ASD tug is suited to salvage operations, wreck removals and long-distance ocean towage.

Importantly, *Pacific Salvor* is also equipped to assist vessels affected by onboard fires. It carries specialist firefighting equipment, and its crew members have received the necessary training to provide firefighting support when a distressed vessel, or its cargo, is on fire.

This capability is especially significant in an island nation. Solomon Islands communities depend heavily on the ocean for food, transport and livelihoods. The marine environment also underpins the country’s valuable fisheries and tourism industries. A serious marine incident can therefore have consequences extending well beyond an individual vessel or port.

PacTow’s increased presence in Honiara is intended to help reduce response times when urgent assistance is needed. Having a capable tug already stationed in Solomon Islands means it can be mobilised more quickly than a vessel deployed from elsewhere in the region.

A recent example of this capability in action was PacTow’s support to Solomon Islands authorities following the arrest of the *MV Wealth*, a Belize-flagged cargo vessel believed to have been engaged in transnational organised crime activities. After being intercepted and placed under police escort, the vessel broke down at sea while being escorted to Honiara. PacTow’s *Pacific Salvor* was mobilised to carry out the emergency tow, assisting police by safely towing the vessel to Honiara. The incident demonstrated the practical value of having a capable tug and experienced crew based in Solomon Islands.

Oil-spill response equipment planned for Honiara

PacTow is also planning to purchase and store oil-spill response equipment at its Honiara base, including containment booms that can be deployed when required.

The company already stores equipment of this kind at its Port Moresby tug base in PNG. Establishing a similar resource in Honiara would provide a locally based first-response capability, enabling equipment to be deployed promptly following a spill or other pollution incident.

At present, Solomon Islands does not have sufficient locally

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stored equipment and marine response capacity to adequately address a significant oil spill or a serious fire onboard a vessel. PacTow wants to help strengthen that capability in support of the broader maritime community, as well as the Solomon Islands Ports Authority (SIPA) and the Solomon Islands Maritime Authority (SIMA).

On board ASD tug Pacific Salvor in Honiara.

Building the Honiara operation

As part of its expansion, PacTow plans to relocate its Honiara office to larger premises and employ additional local staff. In the immediate term, this will include a new administration officer who will also assist the operation as a driver.

Although these are modest initial steps, they are intended to provide a stronger foundation for the company's longer-term plans in Solomon Islands, and indeed the region.

PacTow is not solely a towage company. Across the region, it provides a broad range of marine services, including salvage, emergency response (including emergency towing), mooring services, commercial diving and life raft services. It works across multiple sectors, including shipping, oil and gas, mining, tourism and government.

The company's intention is to make more of these services available from its Solomon Islands operation as demand grows.

Localisation goal

PacTow is also considering the future reflagging of *Pacific Salvor* as a Solomon Islands vessel, provided its local business grows sufficiently to support the investment. The company wants the tug to be crewed by Solomon Islanders and, in June, launched a recruitment campaign targeting local seafarers.

A Solomon Islander crew for *Pacific Salvor* would follow the localisation model PacTow has pursued in PNG, where its vessels are crewed and captained by PNG nationals wherever possible. *Kavachi* already demonstrates this approach in Solomon Islands, in that it is Solomon Islands flagged and operated by a full local crew.

Achieving the same outcome for *Pacific Salvor* will take time. ASD tugs are sophisticated vessels, and there is currently no Solomon Islander maritime professional with the qualifications and experience required to operate them.

PacTow plans to help address this gap by investing in the development of local maritime professionals. This would include bringing Solomon Islanders to PNG to gain valuable sea time on PacTow's fleet of ASD tugs, as well as sponsoring further study and professional qualifications.

The positive bilateral relationship between PNG and Solomon Islands provides a valuable foundation for this approach. The arrangements between the two countries make it relatively straightforward for Solomon Islanders and Papua New Guineans to study and work in each other's countries.

Investing in the next generation

PacTow is also planning to offer additional maritime cadetship scholarships to young Solomon Islanders.

The company currently has four Solomon Islander cadets, one of whom is a woman, undertaking studies at the Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies in Fiji. Before commencing their Fiji studies, the cadets completed preliminary training and gained practical experience at PacTow's Honiara operation.

Upon completing their cadetships, the goal is for the young Solomon Islanders to work on PacTow vessels in Solomon Islands. There may also be opportunities for them to gain experience in PNG or elsewhere in Melanesia.

Kasnari said the program is both a workforce investment and part of PacTow's responsibility as a regional business supporting the country's maritime sector.

"A strong maritime sector depends on skilled local people," he said. "We want to create opportunities for young Solomon Islanders to build long-term maritime careers and, over time, take on increasingly senior roles."

A regional approach

Founded in PNG in 1977, Pacific Towing has grown into a significant Melanesian marine services provider. Its Solomon Islands expansion is not intended to happen overnight. Rather, the company is taking a staged approach – adding capable vessels, investing in equipment, employing additional staff and developing local maritime skills as its business grows.

For Solomon Islands, the presence of *Pacific Salvor* provides an additional layer of maritime support. For PacTow, it is an opportunity to build on more than a decade of local operations while contributing to safer shipping, stronger emergency preparedness and the protection of the marine environment.

As maritime activity continues to develop across the Pacific, practical investments in vessels, equipment and people will become increasingly important. PacTow hopes its growing Honiara operation can play a useful role in that broader effort.

Pacific Towing is Melanesia's largest marine services business. It employs more than 250 staff and has a fleet of 21 vessels. It provides a broad spectrum of marine services including towage, emergency response, commercial diving, life raft services, and salvage. PacTow is part of a larger sea and land logistics group wholly owned by Steamships Limited. To learn more about PacTow: www.pacifictowingmarineservices.com.

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