



04 November 2021

Media statement from the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Hon. Mark Brown.

Cook Islands borders to reopen on 13 January 2022

Welcoming in the 2022 New Year will also include celebrating the re-opening of the Cook Islands' borders to New Zealand on 13 January (CKT), the Prime Minister Mark Brown announced today.

Prime Minister Brown said Cabinet had made the important decision to re-open the borders to two-way quarantine-free travel from New Zealand on 13 January 2022 based on a range of high-level advice. This included from the Government's Border Easement Taskforce, comprising lead officials from key agencies, and from data modelling experts in New Zealand.

Prime Minister Brown said he was very pleased to be providing certainty and hope about the next step for the nation.

Cabinet's decision means the current Travel Advisory is extended until 11.59pm on Wednesday 12 January 2022 (CKT).

The Cook Islands borders have been closed since 16 August this year when the first community case of the Delta variant of COVID-19 was reported in New Zealand.

Prime Minister Brown also announced there will be two managed return flights from New Zealand before Christmas.

Decision to open

"Looking back we have made the right call every time we needed to make a decision," said Prime Minister Brown. "Every step we have taken has led us to the point today where we remain COVID-19 free, can live without restrictions, and have protected ourselves with a very high vaccination rate of 96% of our eligible population."

But keeping our borders closed indefinitely was no longer a viable option, said Prime Minister Brown. While the health and safety of Cook Islanders remained his number one priority, the country needed to move forward with its management of COVID-19.

"Our border closure has hit many people very hard and it has taken a toll, mentally and financially. That is why Cabinet has today very carefully weighed the balance between living in a COVID-19-free bubble - to living outside that bubble with safety."

Why January 13?

Prime Minister Brown said taking a highly precautionary approach to COVID-19 throughout the pandemic had provided the Government with the time to assess and learn from what was happening domestically and internationally. "I am confident that mid-January is the right time for our country to welcome vaccinated visitors from New Zealand back to our beautiful shores, with the possibility of opening to Australia later in the year," he said.

The January date would allow TMO and MFAI to immediately focus on the pre-Christmas managed return flights - while also working in parallel with other Government agencies to finalise the requirements and procedures around the new border settings and approach.

Preparedness

Prime Minister Brown said providing for public health and safety had been at the forefront of Government policy over the last 20 months, with a great deal of success. Today's decisions further demonstrated that the utmost care was being taken on the COVID-19 journey.

"By 13 January 2022, we will be as ready as possible to safely open our borders and to keep them open."

He said that vaccination was the best possible defence against COVID-19 and that the country's high vaccination rate of 96% of those eligible was impressive. "Make no mistake, this virus attacks the unvaccinated. It is the unvaccinated who will fill our hospital wards.

"We have been very fortunate to stay COVID-free while our vaccination programme is underway and I thank everyone for their positivity, care and goodwill towards each other by getting vaccinated," he said

Prime Minister Brown said that planning for booster shots for the 40+ age group was already underway and that when children's vaccinations become available early next year the entire population would be in a very safe place indeed.

Additionally there would be eligibility criteria for people from New Zealand entering the Cook Islands, including being double-vaccinated and testing negative before departure. This means that only those aged over 12 years will qualify until New Zealand begins its vaccination of children.

Cost to country

Prime Minister Brown said that significant financial and economic reasons were also part of the mid-January decision. The sooner that tourism can safely resume business, the better, he said.

"Every day our borders are closed we lose \$1 million. And every week we are closed, it costs the Government \$1 million in support packages. That money is money that cannot be spent on important priorities like our health and education sectors and frankly, that is no longer sustainable beyond January. The sooner we can safely open our borders to visitors, the sooner we can generate much-needed economic activity."

Prime Minister Brown outlined that keeping the borders closed any longer would force the Government to take on unsustainable amounts of debt, which would consume an ever-growing proportion of expenditure. "The cost of borrowing money for the prolonged rollout of the Economic Response Plan would reduce our ability to achieve other priorities, with serious impact on our infrastructure and other services," he said.

Population and work force

Furthermore, the Prime Minister warned about the possibility of “long-term economic scarring” if the country’s population and workforce continued to decline as people sought work overseas.

“A lack of work, opportunity and hope can cause some of our people, our workforce and our entrepreneurs to leave for New Zealand and Australia,” he said. “This has been happening for many years in our Pa Enua and we have seen it start in Rarotonga while our borders have been closed. We are duty-bound to do all we can to prevent this outward flow.”

Managed return flights

Separately, Prime Minister Brown confirmed the first of two managed return flights from New Zealand will arrive in Rarotonga on Thursday 18 November CKT. The second flight is scheduled for arrival on Thursday 2 December CKT. Both flights will depart from Auckland and will allow Cook Island residents to return home before Christmas provided they meet established criteria.

Returnees would be encouraged to isolate at home as far as possible in the 14 days before departure and would need to return at least one pre-departure Covid-19 test. Health officials would be at Auckland Airport for pre-departure vetting of passenger health status and required documentation. Rapid antigen testing would be undertaken if anyone displayed COVID-19 symptoms. All returnees will be required to enter MIQ at the Edgewater Resort for up to 10 days.

Next steps

Today’s announcements are the first in a suite of Government updates scheduled for the next 7-10 days.

Tomorrow night, further details about the managed return flights will be released and on Monday further information about the Economic Support Programme from now to the border opening will be provided.

Next week there will be updates on the Economic Recovery Roadmap and further information about vaccination and travel protocols.

Reminders

Prime Minister Brown reminded all Cook Islanders to tag or sign in with CookSafe and to turn on Bluetooth for CookSafe+.

He encouraged people to keep up with frequent hand washing, mask-wearing and physical distancing and he strongly urged people to get vaccinated, if they had not already done so.

People are also advised to regularly check official communications for both the Cook Islands and New Zealand at their websites, which are: www.covid19.gov.ck and www.covid19.govt.nz

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