EUROPEAN UNION

SPREP
Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme

PacWastePlus
PACIFIC WASTE MANAGEMENT

This initiative is supported by **PacWastePlus**-a 85-month project funded by the European Union (**EU**) and implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (**SPREP**) **to sustainably and cost effectively improve regional management of waste and pollution.**

*This has been produced with assistance from the **European Union**. Its contents are the sole responsibility of **SPREP** and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.*

COOK ISLANDS

Waste Data Profile

June 2025

Cook Islands and PacWastePlus

Cook Islands is one of fifteen countries to participate in the SPREP implemented and European Union's Delegation to the Pacific funded PacWastePlus Programme. The PacWaste Plus Programme aimed to improve waste management activities across the islands and strengthen the capacity of governments, industries, and communities to manage waste and protect human health and the environment.

About Cook Islands

The Cook Islands consist of 15 small islands with a total population of approximately 17,500. The primary languages spoken are Cook Island Māori and English. Rarotonga, the most populous island, is home to around 13,000 people—over 74% of the national population—and serves as the administrative hub. Aitutaki is the second most populated island, with roughly 1,900 residents.

Local consumption habits have shifted from primarily using locally sourced foods like fish, yams, and taro to a growing reliance on imported packaged foods such as rice and processed meats, along with other luxury goods. This shift has contributed to a rise in waste generation.

Government, Policies, Strategies, and Responsibilities

There is no specific legislation dedicated solely to waste management in the Cook Islands. Instead, waste-related responsibilities are governed through broader environmental and public health laws. In 2013, the government introduced the National Solid Waste Strategy 2013–2016, which provided context and direction for improving waste management across the islands. The strategy aims to enhance waste reduction, recycling, and disposal systems, but also highlights the lack of reliable data on waste generation and management as a key challenge.

Responsibility for waste management is shared across various government bodies:

National Government

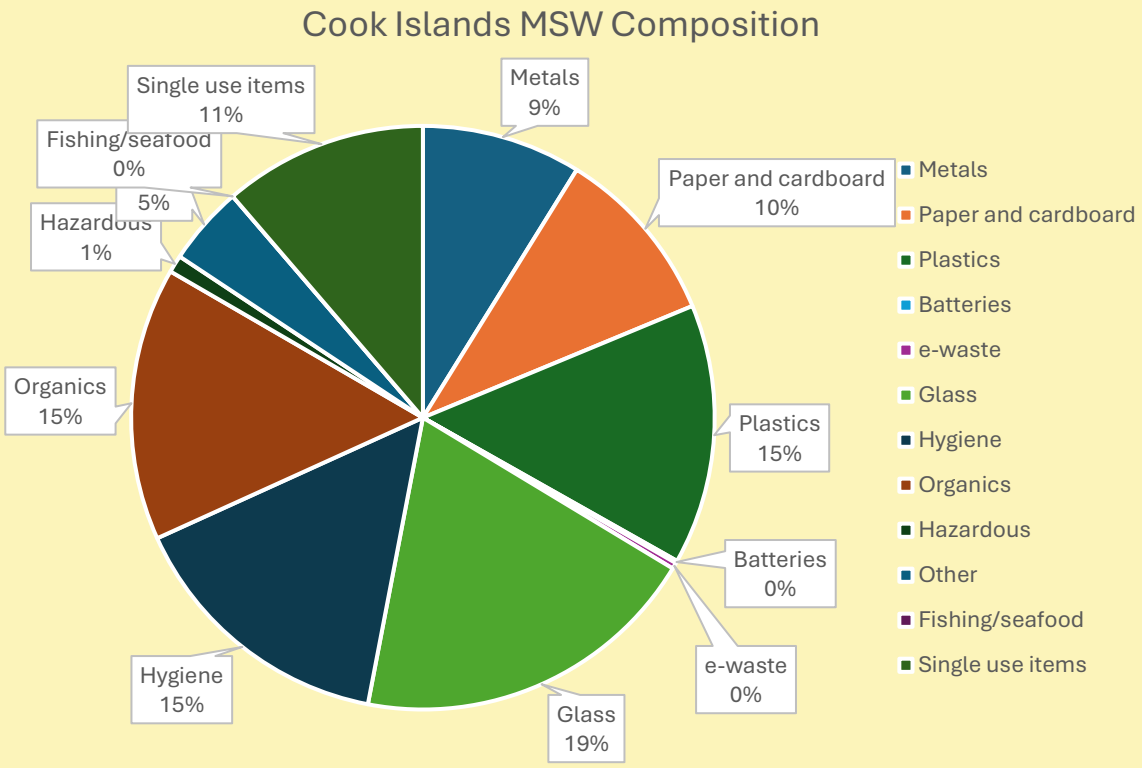
- **National Environment Services** – Develops environmental policy, enforces regulations against illegal dumping, monitors pollution, and ensures safe chemical disposal.
- **Ministry of Infrastructure Cook Islands** – Oversees waste collection and disposal services.
- **Ministry of Health** – Administers the *Public Health Act 2004*.
- **Ministry of Agriculture** – Administers the *Pesticides Act 1987*

Waste Practices

Waste management in the Cook Islands is challenging, largely due to the population being spread across multiple islands. At present, rubbish collection and recycling services are primarily available on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, both of which have lined landfills and systems for collecting recyclables for processing and export. In contrast, the outer islands have minimal waste collection and very limited recycling services. These constraints have led to issues such as illegal dumping, open burning of household waste, and improper disposal of hazardous materials becoming widespread.

Core KPIs	Result
1. Count / capacity of modern waste facilities	**5 / unknown**
2. Count / capacity of unregulated waste facilities	**15 / unknown**
3. National recovery rate (%)	**34%**
4. Per capita waste generation rate (kg/capita/year)	**115**
5. Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) composition (%)	Error! Reference source not found.
6. Household waste capture rate (%)	**84%**
7. Household collection service coverage (%)	**84%**
8. Fulfilment of MEA reporting requirements (%)	**15%**

Supplementary KPIs	Result
1. Cost of disposal to landfill ($/tsonne/annum)	**$181**
2. Weight of waste disposed (tonnes per annum)	**397**
3. Weight of waste recovered (tonnes per annum)	**840**
4. Volume and type of stockpiled hazardous waste (m3)	• **Asbestos: no data** • **E-waste: 100m^3** • **Healthcare and pharmaceutical waste: no data** • **Used oil: 0.4m^3** • **Used tyres: No data** • **Obsolete chemicals: 0.6m^3** • **Batteries 100m^3**
5. Marine plastic pollution potential (tonnes per annum)	**34.6**
6. Awareness and support of waste management services (%)	**93%**
7. Proportion of strategic waste management initiatives implemented (%)	**83%**
8. Commercial waste capture rate (%)	**85%**
9. Commercial collection service coverage (%)	**76%**
10. Total weight of disaster waste disposed (tonnes per annum)	**0**



National Waste Analysis Snapshot

About the Data

- All population estimates used to calculate performance indicators are based on national census data from 2021.
- Audit data presented the composition proportions of waste sampled at Aitutaki and Rarotonga landfills, with volumetric estimates for each category, based on visual assessment only. To calculate the weights of landfilled waste on the Cook Islands, density conversion factors were used based on Australia's New South Wales Environment Protection Authority's (NSW EPA). Sample size for the 2021 was 146 households and 53 businesses across Rarotonga and Aitutaki.
- Commercial waste service coverage reporting has relied primarily on survey information conducted during audits of commercial business waste
- Waste facility registers were collected in 2025 from waste facilities where possible, certain pieces of information were not provided by the reporting deadline.

Data Collection Challenges

- Waste facility registers in the Cook Islands lack key information, including data on facility capacity, making it difficult to assess infrastructure needs and performance.
- No data has been provided from the Aitutaki sites, reflecting broader challenges with consistency, reporting, and accessibility of waste management data across the islands.

Highlights

- The waste system in the Cook Islands achieves a relatively high capture rate of 84.3% (KPI6).
- There is also strong community backing for waste services, with 93% awareness and support (SKPI6).

Emerging Issues

Emerging issues in the Cook Islands' waste sector include the growing volume and complexity of waste, particularly from increased consumption of imported goods These materials pose environmental and health risks if not managed properly and highlight the need for improved hazardous waste systems.

High public awareness (93%) and strong commercial waste service coverage (75.72%) provide a solid foundation for further engagement and system improvements.

Strengthening data collection, expanding services to outer islands, and investing in circular economy initiatives (such as reuse and local processing) could enhance resilience and sustainability in waste management.

Waste Management Practices and KPI Narrative

Waste Facilities and Waste Handled Each Year	No Data	**Hazardous Waste Stockpiles**	No Data
Household per Capita Waste Generation	Each year, approximately 115 tonnes of household waste is generated per capita.	**Disaster Waste**	There has been no disasters occur in the last 5 years to record data for; therefore disaster waste is recorded as 0.
Household Waste Statistics	On average, each person generates 115 kg of waste annually, contributing to a total of 397 tonnes of waste disposed each year. The household waste capture and collection service coverage is relatively high, at 84.3%, indicating that most households are accessing formal waste services. However, with a national recovery rate of 34%, there is significant potential to divert more waste from disposal through increased recycling and resource recovery efforts. Encouragingly, public awareness and support for waste management services is strong, at 93%, suggesting a solid foundation for improving participation and engagement in waste reduction initiatives.	**Marine Waste**	As calculated in the 2023 report, the marine plastic pollution potential was identified as 34.6 tonnes per year.
Commercial Waste Statistics	The commercial waste statistics indicate a relatively robust level of service coverage and waste capture. The commercial sector achieves an 85% waste capture rate, with collection services reaching approximately 76% of businesses.	**Strategic Initiatives and MEA Reporting**	Progress on strategic initiatives is strong, with approximately 83.3% of identified waste management initiatives implemented. This reflects a clear commitment to improving the sector through structured planning and investment. However, fulfilment of Multilateral Environmental Agreement (MEA) reporting requirements remains low, at just 15.6%. This suggests that while domestic actions are advancing, international reporting and compliance need greater attention. I