US Wealth Protection Demand Drives 90% Surge in Cook Islands Trusts – Report

US demand for asset protection is driving record Cook Islands trust growth, with registrations up almost 90% in two years.


Mike Arand, Southpac Group

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, September 17, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Growing US demand for international asset protection structures is helping drive record growth in the Cook Islands financial services sector, with new international trust registrations now almost 90 percent above the level recorded two years earlier.

A new Cook Islands Government report shows registrations rose 42 percent in the past year alone to a record 433, while approximately 85 percent of licensed trustee company revenue comes from US clients, primarily through asset protection structures.

Industry experts say demand is being supported by heightened concern among US business owners and professionals about litigation, professional liability and broader commercial risks.

Financial and insurance services contributed more than NZ$48 million to the Cook Islands economy in 2024/25, up around 27 percent from NZ$38 million in 2019/20.

The sector now accounts for 8.5 percent of real GDP, up from 8.3 percent the previous year.

The surging sector is helping diversify the tourism-reliant nation through higher-value, low-environmental-impact services that can operate remotely during disruptions to international travel.

The growth is being driven in part by international demand for Cook Islands asset protection trusts. The jurisdiction has developed a global reputation for its asset protection legislation,

which has been in place for more than four decades.

Individual providers administer billions of dollars in client assets through international trust structures, much of it for North American clients.

Tauranga-based financial services firm Southpac Group, which specialises in international asset protection and trust administration, reports approximately US$4 billion under administration across its international operations.

Southpac Group CEO Mike Arand says demand is being supported by heightened concern about litigation and professional and business risks in North America.


Matthew Smith, Southpac Group

“The jurisdiction has developed a global reputation for its asset protection trust legislation and is now administering billions of dollars in assets for international clients.

“The United States has driven much of the sector’s recent growth and will remain its most important market.”

> We are seeing more business owners and professionals consider asset protection before a legal claim emerges.”
>
> *Matthew Smith, Director of Business Development, Southpac Group*

Southpac Group lawyer and director of business development Matthew Smith says the rise in trust registrations reflects growing international awareness of the need to protect personal wealth before disputes arise.

“We are seeing more business owners and professionals consider asset protection as part of their broader risk-management and succession planning rather than waiting until a legal claim emerges.

“The Cook Islands has a long-established legal framework, but the industry supporting it must continue investing in specialist people, compliance systems and technology as the number and complexity of international structures grow.”
Smith says the concentration of trustee company revenue in the United States has made North American wealth an important driver of the Cook Islands financial services economy.

He says the jurisdiction's established legal framework and four-decade track record have helped it build credibility among US lawyers, wealth advisers, business owners and professionals.

"As demand increases, the Cook Islands will need to ensure its legal, regulatory and technology infrastructure continues to meet the expectations of increasingly sophisticated international clients."
The number of established roles across the wider financial sector increased from 257 in 2020 to 325 in 2025, a rise of 68 roles or approximately 26 percent.

The sector currently has 299 filled positions, with dozens of roles remaining vacant across legal, accounting, trust administration, compliance and technology functions.

Arand says continued growth will depend on access to highly skilled professionals.
"Financial services contribute more than twice as much to the Cook Islands economy as agriculture, fishing and construction combined.

"Continued growth will depend on access to highly skilled professionals and the technology required to service international clients across multiple jurisdictions."

Arand says the opportunity extends beyond supplying professional expertise.

"As the Cook Islands industry expands, it will require more sophisticated systems for trust administration, regulatory compliance, identity verification, cybersecurity, payments and international client servicing.

"The next phase is not only about registering more trusts. It is about attracting technology, expertise and investment that deepen the industry's presence in the Cook Islands."

Industry experts say the expansion could also create opportunities for fintech and regulatory-technology firms providing trust administration, compliance, identity verification, cybersecurity and international payment solutions.
New Zealand lawyers, accountants and compliance specialists could benefit from the growth, given the close relationship between the two countries and the shortage of specialist workers within the Cook Islands financial sector.

Arand says New Zealand is well placed to help meet this demand, with Southpac combining trustee operations in the Cook Islands and Nevis with group oversight and support from Auckland.

He says for US clients and their advisers, this provides international capability without creating a US operational nexus and is a key point of difference for the business.

“New Zealand is an obvious source of expertise because of the close legal, economic and constitutional relationship between the two countries.

“It also has an established fintech sector and a similar legal and regulatory tradition, which puts its technology providers in a strong position to support that growth.”

The Cook Islands is self-governing in free association with New Zealand, uses the New Zealand dollar and its people hold New Zealand citizenship.

New Zealand is also home to a substantially larger Cook Islands population than the islands themselves, providing a potential pool of professionals who could return home, work remotely or support Cook Islands firms from New Zealand.
Arand says attracting more international financial services and technology businesses could further expand local employment.

“The opportunity now is to ensure the Cook Islands workforce, training systems, regulation and technology develop at the same pace as international demand.”

Asset protection trusts are intended for lawful planning before claims or disputes arise and do not override tax, criminal, insolvency or disclosure obligations.

Mark Joseph Devlin
Impact PR
mark@impactpr.co.nz
Visit us on social media:
LinkedIn

This press release can be viewed online at: https://www.einpresswire.com/article/942808595

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.
© 1995-2026 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.