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MORE FISH FOR HEALTHY SEAS

WWF Policy Brief

A VISION FOR ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES IN REGIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS

The environmental and economic viability of global fisheries remain in crisis, with many Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) unable to rebuild fish populations to sustainable levels. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing also significantly contributes to this problem. A transformation of fisheries governance and fishing practices are urgently required to deliver the 2030 Agenda and specifically the SDG14 priorities to which the European Union (EU) and RFMO contracting parties have committed to. Science-based management protocols are essential in addition to developing a culture of responsibility, accountability and compliance within the entire fisheries sector and with RFMO contracting parties. Substantial advances in data collection of fishing effort, environmental impact and transparency are also essential.

WWF's vision is to ensure the long-term sustainability of fish populations, the protection and conservation of marine ecosystems and vulnerable species, while safeguarding marine biodiversity to deliver viable, sustainable fishing communities. WWF invites RFMO contracting parties and industry stakeholders to work with us to deliver this vision.

As a major fishing power and seafood consumer, the EU has committed to an action plan¹ for international ocean governance including promoting increased regional collaboration on the management of fish populations, improved functioning of existing RFMOs, and confronting illegal fishing practices. WWF calls on the EU to (1) lead on fisheries governance at a global level, (2) urge all RFMOs to intensify efforts to recover fish populations, to support progress towards sustainable fisheries management, and to effectively implement control measures needed to address the problem of illegal fishing practices.

¹ [International Ocean Governance: An agenda for the future of our oceans](#)

Background

Over 20 years have passed since the adoption of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA)², which aimed to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable exploitation of highly migratory and straddling fish stocks. Despite three reviews to assess the implementation of the UNFSA within RFMOs, progress has been very slow³, with poor enforcement, and the majority of global fish populations remaining either maximally sustainably fished (60%) or overfished (33%)⁴. Figures at a regional scale are, in some cases, even more alarming with the Mediterranean and Black Sea, the Southeast Pacific and the Southwest Atlantic all having close to 60% unsustainably fished populations.

An urgent intervention is essential to increase the effective governance of RFMOs if the SDG14 targets are to be met by 2020. The EU is an active member of five tuna RFMOs and eleven non-tuna RFMOs and has made significant commitments to improve the effectiveness of RFMOs up to 2020¹, and therefore has a critical leadership and facilitator role to play in this regard. However, the EU cannot deliver the necessary changes alone, and needs the collaborative efforts of all RFMO contracting parties and cooperating non-contracting parties (from here on, collectively referred to as cooperating parties) to build consensus and work together towards a common goal: to ensure the long-term sustainability of the shared fisheries resources under discussion.

WWF has substantial experience engaging with fisheries stakeholders at global, regional and local levels – including governments, fisheries sector, coastal communities, public agencies, scientists and broader civil society - with the vision of securing healthy marine ecosystems that are recognized as essential for human well-being and supporting sustainable fisheries. In this paper we outline the minimum conservation, transparency and control measures that collectively, we deem vital to be effectively implemented across all RFMOs for this vision to be achieved.

1. Conservation Measures

- Ecosystem approach to fisheries governance

Establishing ecosystem conservation measures to preserve the marine environment and protect living marine resources is an essential part of the role of RFMOs. These conservation measures should be based on science when and where possible, and include spatio-temporal protection of habitats and ecosystems important for different life history phases such as spawning and nursery grounds, as well as the establishment of mitigation measures for fishing impacts on bycatch and incidental catches, and endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species. Precautionary fisheries and ecosystem management should be observed in all RFMOs particularly for ETP species (including CITES and CMS listed species such as sharks and rays, cetaceans, seaturtles and seabirds). This should include effective measures in place to i) assess, and ii) mitigate, the impact of fishing activities on non target species or species with high conservation concerns.

² [United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement](#)

³ [Global Progress Towards Implementing the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement](#)

⁴ [The State of Fisheries and Aquaculture 2018](#)

- **Adoption of precautionary harvest strategies for all fish populations**

All fish populations exploited within an RFMO area should be subject to scientific evidence to inform harvesting within safe biological limits within which populations can recover to a biomass able to deliver maximum sustainable yield (MSY), in line with the Common Fisheries Policy⁵. These conservation reference points establish the upper limit of sustainable fishing and by adopting them presents a means of measuring the sustainability of the fishery to wider society. Conservation reference points should be established for all populations including unintended catch and bycatch species. The absence of scientific data should not be a justification for failing to apply conservation and management measures and the EU should consistently call for application of the precautionary approach to fisheries conservation and management, by calling on States to be more cautious when information is uncertain, unreliable or inadequate, consistent with the UNFSA. Harvest Control Rules must be implemented to ensure that stock levels are maintained at target reference points and, where limit reference points have been exceeded, designed to bring the impacted stock back to sustainable levels. RFMO cooperating parties must be prepared to heavily restrict or even close fisheries that have approached or breached limit reference points to enable the stock to recover to sustainable levels.

- **Adaptive fisheries management to derisk potential climate change impacts**

Climate change is unequivocal and the projected impacts on global fisheries are significant and include: changes in primary productivity, shifts in distribution of fish populations and changes in the yield of exploited species. Climate change mitigation and adaptation policies implemented through RFMOs are essential to minimise the environmental, social and economic consequences on global fisheries. A strong application of the precautionary approach in the presence of significant uncertainty of climate change impacts could represent the only effective measure to prevent overexploitation. Maintaining more abundant fish populations is the most effective mechanism to increase fish population capacity to adapt to environmental change. A reduction in fishing opportunities in all RFMO areas adopting a precautionary approach in case of uncertainties in the assessments of biological resources due to climate change, will increase the resilience of these populations. Supporting lower emissions in RFMO cooperating parties and in the fisheries sector is especially important.

- **Adoption of comprehensive, science-based FAD management strategies**

Each RFMO area should adopt comprehensive, science-based FAD management measures, which should reflect impact mitigation measures as described below. Fishing fleets using FADs must transition to biodegradable and non-entangling FADs to reduce unintended impacts on non-target species and the marine environment. International best practices must be adopted for the handling and release of ETP species. Each RFMO area should rely on scientific evidence and advice to determine the density of FADs and ensure that this density is not exceeded by RFMO contracting parties and their respective fleets. Furthermore, to create accountability with respect to FAD impacts, including through ecosystem effects and marine debris, collection of data and reporting on FAD use, as well as FAD tracking, marking, and monitoring mechanisms must be implemented.

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:354:0022:0061:EN:PDF>

- **Strengthening compliance with conservation measures**

Conservation measures are only as good as their implementation. Significant efforts are required to increase the compliance of RFMO cooperating parties with management measures. Specifically, compliance reporting needs to ensure that all relevant conservation measures (i.e. Resolutions) are listed in the compliance report. Compliance Committees should also be given the mandate to transparently disclose cases of non-compliance for relevant RFMO cooperating parties, and develop a time-bound action plan to address these areas of non-compliance. Additionally, Compliance Committee meetings should be separate from, and well ahead of Commission meetings to ensure RFMO cooperating parties have the necessary time to react to, and address cases of identified non-compliance.

2. Transparency

- **Strengthen the level of reporting for target and bycaught species**

RFMO Secretariats are often underestimating catches of target fish populations due to insufficient or uncertain data. This jeopardizes the sustainable management of important populations. Accurate records of non target bycatch are even rarer. Increased resources are needed to secure reliable data at all levels, for both target and bycatch species through the submission of detailed operational data of all fleets. Failure to report or misreporting must be considered a serious issue of non-compliance. Additionally, electronic data submission needs to become the norm, and already existing or adopted data-sharing mechanisms (e.g. Fisheries Language Universal Exchange) needs to be widely promoted to allow for systematic data collection and timely sharing with RFMOs secretariats and other parties.

- **Increase trust in RFMO management of public resources through open data policies**

Decision-making processes in RFMOs lack transparency, with many crucial issues such as compliance assessment processes, closed to external scrutiny. Fisheries resources are publicly owned assets, managed by government officials, funded by public funds, and intended to be managed in the public interest. Public engagement in some RFMOs remains isolated to the NGO observer organisations, with many critical meetings closed to non-government representatives. This lack of engagement of civil society enables RFMO management and compliance decisions to be made without scrutiny or review of potential biases. An essential step to overcome the opaqueness of these decisions is to make information on compliance assessments and subsequent action plans addressing areas of non-compliance of cooperating parties public, in addition to the public disclosure of fisheries data submitted to secretariats.

- **Fully transparent reporting and catalogue of operational incidents at-sea and people involved**

In December 2017, the EU agreed to implement the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188). This legally binding framework ensures decent working conditions and protects all people associated with the fisheries sectors, including observers. Full reporting of incidents at-sea will allow for identification and potential mitigation of dangerous situations for observers and crews. Having

committed to the implementation of this Convention, the EU now needs to push for the adoption of aligned measures in all RFMOs it is a contracting party.

- **Full accountability for vessels and persons convicted for illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing**

IUU fishing threatens the sustainability of global fisheries resources by contributing to their overexploitation, impeding their recovery and undermining the viability of legal fishing operations. RFMOs need to hold cooperating parties heavily accountable to their flag state responsibilities, including the deterrent sanctioning of any convicted vessel, including all persons involved, of IUU fishing, in line with the UNFSA. IUU vessels and associated persons must be published on lists that are made publicly accessible, with the beneficial owner (if identifiable), captain/master's name and nationality, and all vessel identifications including unique vessel identifier and flag state nationality.

3. Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS)

- **Align all RFMOs to leading global standards in vessel registration and Vessel Monitoring System (VMS)**

A basic requirement with respect to MCS that must be met by all RFMOs as soon as possible is the implementation of best practice, transparent vessel registration and vessel monitoring, for both large and small-scale fishing vessels. In the case of large scale vessels, VMS should be the standardised tool while for smaller (under 12m) vessels, alternative technologies may be adopted. In both cases, monitoring of vessel movements should be carried out in real time, by trained professionals. RFMOs should have regularly updated, transparent vessel registries in place, and require a unique vessel identifier (IMO number) as a prerequisite for authorisation to fish. Cooperating parties should be strongly encouraged to submit their vessel information (including fishing, supply, and refrigerated transport vessels) to the Global Record of Fishing Vessels. As most RFMO mandated VMS systems do not currently ensure that data are sufficiently accurate, do not require that data be shared with authorities, and do not sufficiently enforce implementation of VMS requirements⁴, these major gaps in VMS must be urgently addressed. Finally, RFMO cooperating parties should be encouraged to share their VMS information public as a clear indicator of transparency.

- **Ratify and implement FAO's Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA)**

RFMOs have a major role in driving the ratification and effective implementation of the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) by all coastal states. RFMOs should make the ratification of the PSMA a consideration of licensing within the RFMO area for port states that are also important flag states for the region, and use deterrence tools, such as financial sanctions to prompt compliance with the PSMA. Developing nations should be encouraged to seek assistance and support from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) for funding and capacity building support. RFMOs should also provide a strong supporting role in harmonising the implementation of the PSMA among Cooperating Parties, driving best practices with respect to inspection schemes, data collection and data exchange.

- **Unequivocal monitoring and reporting of 100% transshipment activities**

All transshipments should be subject to 100% monitoring either through human observers or electronic monitoring with cameras, in all RFMO waters. Transshipment activities must be subject to strong sanctions for non-reporting and non-compliance (e.g. sanction of 50% of fishing opportunities until appropriate MCS can be reliably demonstrated). Transshipment requirements need to be buttressed by verification and validation of transshipment activities through the vessel monitoring system (VMS) and the automated identification system (AIS). Failure of both units should require a vessel to return to port or face sanctions for continued operation. Effective EM systems with cameras will have built in VMS so can provide cost effective solution for addressing IUU.

- **Avoidance of total allowable catch (TAC) overshoot and adoption of Catch Documentation Scheme (CDS)**

RFMOs need to deliver effective mechanisms for enforcement and create a culture of compliance with fishing regulations. One of the most effective mechanisms to monitor catches, prevent TAC overshoot, and prevent IUU fishing is through the widespread adoption of electronic CDS. WWF calls on RFMO cooperating parties to prioritise the adoption of electronic CDS for overfished species in the first instance, but eventually for all commercial populations, using the FAO CDS Voluntary Guidelines⁶ as a basis. As already occurs in some RFMOs, there should be a mechanism in place to monitor the catches of main fleets in “real time” in order to take action when necessary for avoiding limits overshoot.

- **Sanctions for improving fisheries governance**

We urge the EU to promote the enforcement and compliance of recommendations by the RFMOs and take a leadership role within these fora. Sanctions whether they are in the form of lost fishing opportunities or other financial mechanisms have proven to be one of the most effective instruments to encourage reporting, promote compliance and increase sustainable fisheries governance.

⁶ [FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Catch Documentation Schemes](#)



A vision for sustainable fisheries in RFMOs

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Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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