



FOURTH REGIONAL FISHERIES MINISTERIAL MEETING

5 July 2023

Agenda Item:	4
Paper No:	RFMM4.WP01
Title:	Outcomes of the Fifteenth SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting

Summary:

The Pacific Community (SPC) Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meeting was held in-person at the SPC Headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia, from March 20th to 24th, 2023.

The meeting focused on important regional issues related to the management of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, including the impacts of climate change on fisheries, food and nutritional security, and economic growth. Three main work programmes discussed and endorsed during the meeting were: (1) future arrangements for the SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings and the process and timeline for supporting members to review regional policies, including "A New Song for Coastal Fisheries" and the "Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries," (2) preliminary goals and objectives of the new Pacific Regional Aquaculture Strategy and upcoming mid-term review of the Aquatic Biosecurity Framework, and (3) SPC's work on climate change and its impact on fisheries. These discussions and endorsements will guide the SPC in its work towards sustainable management and development of fisheries resources in the Pacific region.

Recommendations

Ministers are invited to:

- i. **Note** the outcomes of the 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting.
- ii. **Note** and **endorse** the consensus reached by the Heads of Fisheries on the future arrangements of SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings.
- iii. **Note** the agreement by the 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting on the proposal for intersessional consideration on the process and timeline for supporting members to review the two regional fisheries policies.

Introduction/Background

The Pacific Community (SPC) Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meeting is an important regional gathering for heads of fisheries, covering a wide range of interests, for which national fisheries agencies have responsibility, and for which the SPC and in particular its Division of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) provides scientific and technical assistance, as well as capacity building support. The meeting plays a unique and critical role in providing strategic guidance and direction to SPC FAME. Through sharing knowledge and best practices and identifying sustainable management strategies. The SPC HoF meeting plays a critical role in ensuring the long-term health and productivity of fisheries resources in the region.

The 15th SPC HoF meeting was held in Noumea, New Caledonia, from the 20th to 24th March 2023. It was an in-person meeting, which allowed members and observers to travel to SPC Headquarters and participate in-person. The meeting was attended by 22 members, comprising of American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, New Caledonia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, the United States of America, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna.

The meeting was chaired by Mr. Joseph Gestin, the Director of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in Wallis and Futuna.

15th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting outcomes

The Heads of Fisheries at the meeting discussed critical regional issues concerning the management of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture. These issues included the impact of climate change on fisheries and aquaculture, food and nutritional security, and economic growth. The Outcomes of the 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting¹ identified key actions to guide the SPC's work programmes in 2023 and beyond.

During the meeting, there were extensive discussions on the impact of climate change on fisheries, particularly for the most vulnerable members, and how SPC's work programmes on fisheries and ocean monitoring can create an advanced warning system to understand and mitigate the effects of climate change on tuna fisheries.

The Heads of Fisheries reviewed and noted the positive progress on implementation of members' needs and priorities, including strategic directions provided during 14th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting and the 3rd Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting which have guided the SPC FAME work programme for 2022 to 2023.

The Heads of Fisheries discussed the progress on the development of a new regional aquaculture strategy. They confirmed the revised process for its development, endorsed the preliminary goals and objectives suggested in the Regional Aquaculture Assessment as a basis for member consultations, and highlighted opportunities related to restorative aquaculture. "Restorative aquaculture", refers to aquaculture that provides direct ecological benefits to the environment, with the potential to generate net-positive environmental outcomes.

The Heads of Fisheries also discussed the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework and noted that its mid-term review, which was delayed due to the pandemic, will now proceed.

¹ [Outcomes of the Fifteenth SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting](#)

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They recognised the need to nominate national aquatic biosecurity focal points to facilitate the development of aquatic biosecurity networks and tasked SPC to work with members to establish the Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity Implementation Committee to provide oversight of the review.

The Heads of Fisheries acknowledged and endorsed the Outcomes and Actions Reports from the 5th Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA5) and the 2nd Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD2)². They also considered and endorsed specific recommendations from both reports to guide their work on sustainable coastal fisheries and aquaculture management in the region.

For CBFD2, three key recommendations were transmitted to HoF15. These were:

- Recommendation 35 (a). The CBFD2 requests HoF15 to encourage SPC members to initiate national community-based fisheries dialogues to improve communication with CSOs/NSAs and better address their needs and concerns related to coastal fisheries management.
- Recommendation 35 (b). The CBFD2 requests HoF15 to recognise the emerging issue of deep seabed mining and its potential consequences for coastal fisheries, and requests members to facilitate more independent research on deep sea ecosystems before consideration is given to commercial deep seabed mining.
- Recommendation 35 (c). The CBFD2 requests HoF15 to encourage SPC members to increase operational budgets for CBFM within national and sub-national government agencies, and to develop appropriate financial mechanisms to directly support communities to more effectively manage their coastal resources.

The Heads of Fisheries acknowledged the establishment of the Pacific Islands Ocean Acidification Centre in 2021 and the progress made in developing the regional monitoring framework. They recognised the significance of the initiative in addressing the impacts of climate change on the region's fisheries and ecosystems.

The Heads of Fisheries also acknowledged the update provided on the Pacific Maritime Zones Status and expressed appreciation for the development of the Pacific Maritime Boundaries Dashboard. They recognise the relevance of this initiative in supporting the sustainable management and development of fisheries resources in the Pacific islands region.

Key issues to be considered

Future arrangements of SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting

In 2017, the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders agreed to make fisheries a standing agenda item, recognising the importance of coastal fisheries. The 11th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting recommended that the meeting should focus on guiding the strategic direction and work-plan priorities of the SPC FAME across all its work areas. Heads of Fisheries also agreed to convene the meeting annually for an initial two-year trial period and to focus the agenda on decision points related to SPC results and future priorities, regional coastal fisheries governance and policy matters, and emerging issues of concern.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the fisheries and aquaculture activities of the Blue Pacific. This resulted in unexpected consequences and restrictions in

² [Outcomes and Actions Report from the 2nd Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue](#)

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the region which required adaptation for the Heads of Fisheries meeting. SPC also faced critical operating constraints due to the pandemic, related impacts on people movement, transport, and travel links, which included the inability to host in-person meetings. However, with support from members and partners, the SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings were successfully delivered entirely online via Zoom between 2020 and 2022. Despite the virtual format, more than 21 discussion papers were presented and discussed, leading to key outcomes aimed at addressing critical issues affecting fisheries and aquaculture in the region. These included managing and responding to the impact of COVID-19 on food security and economic growth.

Some of the key notable achievements from the past three SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings during the pandemic were:

- The establishment of the Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD), which replaced the Coastal Fisheries Working Group, providing Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other Non-State Actors (NSAs) with a platform to offer advice and information on key needs to the Heads of Fisheries through the RTMCFA.
- The policy on the governance of fisheries, aquaculture, and marine ecosystems (SPC FAME) data.
- The endorsement of SPC FAME's 2022-2027 business plan guided by members priorities and aligned to the SPC Strategic Plan 2022-2031.
- The Regional Aquaculture Assessment which identified challenges limiting the extent of the contribution of the aquaculture sector to employment, food security, livelihoods, environmental protection, and economic growth.
- The endorsement of SPC FAME's climate change work programmes and new regional climate initiatives for fisheries. The outcomes were aimed at ensuring sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture resources in the Pacific for economic growth, food security, cultural, and environmental conservation.

Lessons from the past three annual Heads of Fisheries meetings

The shift towards holding HoF and RTMCFA meetings on an annual basis has provided a responsive approach to members priorities and needs, including timely assistance during unforeseen challenges as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provided an opportunity to promptly deliberate and formulate necessary adjustments using the online meeting modality to continue annual discussions. Virtual meetings have become more important and relevant during and post-COVID-19 for several reasons, including increased accessibility, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and inclusivity. On the other hand, the fully virtual meetings while proven effective, have increased cognitive loads leading to fatigue and reduced informal engagement among participants due to technical issues and the lack of face-to-face interaction.

The SPC Heads of Fisheries and the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture have been significant in shaping regional policies and frameworks, and the outcomes of these meetings have led to innovative solutions being shared more widely and best practices being implemented more effectively.

In deliberating the future arrangements for the Heads of Fisheries meetings, the following outcomes were endorsed:

- The meeting continues to be held annually and in-person.

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- The format of the meeting would include a hybrid format, at least biennially, to increase participation.
- The meeting would be rescheduled from March to April each year.
- The duration of the meeting would be tailored to the agenda but limited to three days with up to two days of side meetings and/or workshops.
- The focus of HoF would continue to be on regional issues and strategic in nature, with technical issues being assigned to technical meetings.
- SPC would develop the draft agenda in consultation with members, the previous and incoming Chairs, and would survey members on possible items to include.
- The current meeting format would be maintained which includes presentations and break-out group discussions, using break-out groups only as needed, and allowing more time for feedback to plenary.
- During meetings, technology would be used to support discussions, but ensuring that it supports a consensus approach.
- The meeting week would be scheduled to allow members and SPC staff to interact and develop processes efficiently.

Process and timeline for supporting members review of the regional polices – *A new Song for Coastal Fisheries and Roadmap for Sustainable Fisheries.*

The 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting discussed the proposed process and timeline for reviewing existing regional fisheries policies, including the Regional Roadmap and the New Song for Coastal Fisheries. The review aims to ensure close alignment with the implementation of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

The Heads of Fisheries also discussed key questions intended to assist the design and implementation of the review, covering the scope, objectives, process and elements, timeline, and support for members.

The review of these regional fisheries policies would consider both the effectiveness of the existing policies to date and how they can be updated and adapted to align with regional efforts to ensure sustainable fisheries, enhanced livelihoods, sustainable economic growth, food security, and resilience in the face of external pressures like climate change and natural disasters.

The Heads of Fisheries agreed that SPC would distribute a revised proposal on the review to members after the FFC meeting for consideration. The revised proposal is outlined in WP05.

Recommendations:

Ministers are invited to:

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- iii. **Note** the agreement by the 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting on the proposal for intersessional consideration on the process and timeline for supporting members to review the two regional fisheries policies.