

## Agenda Item 4      Status, trends, emerging issues and innovative responses to ensure responsible and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture: Building back better

The SOFIA publication remains an important international report for decision-makers, scientists, and stakeholders alike. It continues to describe well the current status, trends, and prospects for global fisheries and aquaculture sectors. The Pew Charitable Trusts (Pew) welcomes the new structure of the report that also sets these status and trends in the context of sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The SOFIA report continues to highlight relative increases in global capture fisheries and aquaculture production, as well as continued global growth in food fish consumption. Marine capture fisheries remain a significant contributor to global fish production and is projected to stay at high levels. Pew notes that, of the assessed marine fish stocks, the proportion of fish stocks that are within biologically sustainable levels continues to decrease and that, in contrast, the proportion of stocks fished at biologically unsustainable levels continues to increase – with around one-third of assessed marine fish stocks overfished.

Pew echoes the SOFIA publication in highlighting that a movement toward more intensively managed fisheries has led to improvements in certain stocks, while fisheries with less-developed management systems the stocks often become or remain unsustainable. Pew urges replication of successful science-based policies and measures, enhancement of scientific monitoring and assessments, and strengthening of control and compliance, in order to reverse and prevent continued overexploitation, and ensure long-term sustainability of global fish resources. This would help meet human productivity needs and ensure resilience of fisheries food production systems to unforeseeable situations such as that brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching effects on fisheries around the globe, which will continue to be felt well into 2021. As noted by the FAO COVID-19 Task Force, pandemic-related lockdowns have had significant policy and management implications, including disruptions to monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS) functions at the domestic, regional, and international level. Specifically, the Task Force notes that many of the regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) have faced “disruption to at sea observer programmes”, which will lead to “negative consequences on the MCS of fishing activities and the fight against illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing globally.” Additionally, RFMO decision-making shifted to virtual meetings, due to bans on large gatherings and travel-related restrictions, with mixed results. Many of the RFMOs, which collectively manage and set rules for more than 130 internationally managed fish stocks, delayed development and adoption of vitally important conservation measures.

Therefore, to mitigate the effects of pandemic and reduce opportunities for IUU fishing activities, Pew urges States to embrace the recommendations of the COVID-19 Task Force<sup>1</sup>, including expanding the use of electronic monitoring and reporting and returning MCS efforts to pre-pandemic levels as soon as possible.

Equally urgent is the need for States and RFMOs to develop science-based management procedures and effective compliance systems. Together, these strategies would shock-proof domestic and international fisheries to unexpected disruptions such as COVID-19 by automating, to the extent possible, information collection, stock management, and compliance oversight, while ensuring healthy and resilient food systems for the long term.

Additionally, Pew urges States and RFMOs to immediately consider implementing the following practices for virtual decision-making, in order to enable RFMOs to resume their responsibilities in 2021. These practices, which were drawn directly from experiences and lessons learned in 2020, would benefit RFMOs to reach consensus regardless of the meeting format – virtual or in-person—and increase transparency of decision-making.

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<sup>1</sup> How is COVID-19 affecting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems: <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8637en>

Communicate meeting expectations early and clearly:

1. Commit to a virtual format at least eight (8) months prior to meeting date, to allow adequate time for Secretariat and members to select and test IT systems.
2. Publish clear procedures for conduct of virtual meetings to improve clarity and predictability.
3. Circulate detailed agendas well in advance and update as changes are made, to enable Members to prepare and engage efficiently and effectively.

Progress as much work as possible in advance of decision-making meetings:

1. Hold adequate intersessional virtual meetings, providing critical time for initial negotiation and policy development.
2. Produce pre-meeting discussion documents, securing ample member input into these and making them available to Observers in real time, to allow adequate time for information gathering and negotiations, and to identify potential sticking points in advance of the annual meeting, in a transparent manner.
3. Use pre-recorded presentations to communicate scientific and/or background papers in advance of meetings, to make room on abbreviated meeting agendas for key negotiations.
4. Consider holding all scientific meetings virtually, including post-pandemic, to reduce Secretariat spending while reducing barriers to participation. Savings could be redirected to support development of management strategy evaluation (MSE) tools, as part of future shock-proofing, and other important scientific processes.

Create formats and processes more conducive to reaching consensus and fulfilling mandates:

1. Focus virtual meeting agendas on pressing conservation measures, such as those with a new stock assessment and/or necessary to end overfishing or rebuild stocks, and on advancement of frameworks that will help to shock-proof management moving forward—such as electronic monitoring and management procedures.
2. Discuss significant agenda items using shorter time blocks over successive days to provide space for bilaterals and member delegation discussions.
3. Make use of formal email groups or IT systems that increase opportunities for scheduling and hosting side discussions, as desired by meeting participants.
4. Clarify the consequences for parties failing to reach consensus, and ensure they are sufficiently motivating to drive consensus. At a minimum, lack of consensus should not result in no management measure (e.g. an unregulated fishery) or a rollover of an existing measure that is not in line with the best available science.
5. Provide a near-real time record of interventions that identify government positions and responses to proposals to ensure participants can track discussions, particularly if they experience momentary interruptions in their internet connections, and to increase transparency to Observer organizations.

Empower the Chair to lead members through the meeting:

1. Support the Chair in maintaining agenda times and structure, and updating agenda items and times in as close to real time as possible, to improve predictability and efficiency of all members' engagement.
2. Provide the Chair authority to propose strawman text to improve efficiency and maximize the likelihood of reaching consensus during shortened meetings.
3. Publish detailed meeting reports shortly after conclusion of each meeting and announce impactful decisions via public circulars or statements in order to promote transparency and ensure stakeholders and the public are aware of decisions.