

Report from COFI 33.

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The 33rd biannual meeting of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) was held at the FAO headquarters in Rome from 9-13 July 2018. COFI was established to provide a global inter-governmental forum for consideration of international fishery and aquaculture issues, and to review and direct the work program for the FAO in the field of fisheries and aquaculture. There were 114 countries participating; at least 750 delegates and observers attended. The US delegation was led by Deirdre Warner-Kramer of the State Department. John Henderschedt was the Commerce lead. In addition to several specialists from State and Commerce and a US Coast Guard representative, the delegation also included a representative of the Regional Fishery Management Councils (me) and a representative from the NGOs (Gerry Leape from Pew).

All of the documents for the meeting are on the COFI 33 website:

<http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/cofi/documents-cofi33/en/>

Meeting Overview

Several subjects of direct interest to some or all of the Regional Councils were discussed frequently in the meeting

FAO Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 and the Blue Growth Initiative

SDG 14 “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources” provides primary policy guidance to the FAO and is the widely accepted aspirational goal of the member nations. The FAO website describes the linkage to the Blue Growth Initiative and the indicators chosen to measure progress on achieving SDG 14:

<http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/goals/goal-14/en/>

The continuing, steady, increase in the proportion of fish populations that are overfished was of great concern; there was general recognition that some regions of the world are having greater success at ending overfishing than others. The US fisheries are clearly a success in terms of sustainable management.

Combatting IUU fishing

There was widespread support for combatting IUU fishing by addressing all aspects of enforcement: information exchange, strengthening port state measures, and developing

guidelines for addressing transshipment and traceability. Several countries and NGOs noted their concern about a high correlation between IUU and other illegal and unethical practices such as forced labor, unsafe working conditions, and other labor violations. They argued that IUU cannot be eliminated without also addressing these other issues, and that fishery managers need to be aware of these social conditions. There did not appear to be broadscale acceptance of this concept, at this time, but it seemed a relatively new concept so it seems likely that it will continue to be pushed. FAO will be developing technical guidelines on the estimation of IUU fishing. Transshipment is also of interest to Members. FAO will conduct further studies to support the development of best practices for regulating, monitoring, and controlling transshipment.

Abandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear.

The subject of an agenda item and a side session, this problem now has its own acronym (ALDFG) and a large number of negative impacts ascribed to it. ALDFG is well known as a negative impact of fisheries (ghost gear) and as a potential source of ecosystem damage. It is less well known as a source of plastics pollution. Gear marking is one solution to ALDFG that is under consideration; voluntary guidelines have been developed and were endorsed. FAO will develop a comprehensive global strategy to tackle issues related to ALDFG

Aquaculture

Aquaculture now provides almost half of global fish production, and continues to grow albeit at a somewhat reduced pace compared to a few years back. After listening to the global discussion on aquaculture, the current NMFS development of an aquaculture initiative has a greater context for me. At a global scale, there is not competition between aquaculture and wild capture fisheries; both are essential to feeding a growing world population and aquaculture takes some of the pressure off of wild capture fisheries which have clearly reached a maximum production level and actually appear to still be above sustainable levels. FAO will be developing sustainable aquaculture guidelines and a Global Information System to monitor/assess status of aquatic genetic resources relevant to aquaculture.

Global importance of small scale fisheries (SSF) and artisanal fisheries

Small scale fisheries, including artisanal fisheries, were one of the most frequently discussed topics at COFI 33, particularly in comparison with industrial scale fisheries which received considerably less attention. Countries that raised topics related to management and sustainability of small scale fisheries covered the range of developed to undeveloped and all parts of the globe. Factors included limited statistics, sustainability initiatives, their role in maintaining social and cultural cohesion, gender dimensions, maintaining access and the diversity of rights based fisheries. 2022 will be the Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture.

Hidden Harvest 2 is expected to be released in 2020; this report is expected to provide new information on SSF to rectify some of the current data gaps.

Meeting Summary

A couple of important reports and initiatives were released in conjunction with this meeting.

- The [State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2018](#) (also known as SOFIA) is a regular FAO report that summarizes statistics on global fisheries and aquaculture. The charts on page 3 that show trends over time of wild capture production and aquaculture production clearly depict the importance of aquaculture in feeding a growing global population and meeting a growing per capita consumption of fish. Wild capture production has been stable for over three decades, while aquaculture production has risen dramatically. There is some unsettling news in SOFIA as well, the chart on page 40 shows the steady increase in the proportion of marine fish stocks that are overfished and the steady decline of stocks that are underfished.
- FAO also released a massive tome on Impacts of climate change on fisheries and aquaculture ([FAO Technical Paper 627](#)) that includes chapters on many regions of the world as well as containing a comprehensive synthesis of current knowledge.
- The Global Record became operational just before the COFI meetings began, and several nations including the US have already uploaded data into it. The GR provides a single access point for information on vessels >24 meters that are used for fishing and fishing-related activities, with the intent of combatting IUU fishing. You can access the Global Record here: <http://www.fao.org/global-record/information-system/en/>. The meeting agenda was comprehensive, and occupied five full days, with numerous side sessions and presentations during the mid-day breaks and in the evenings. Following are my notes on individual agenda items. The report of the Committee, which contains the official record of actions taken on each agenda item has not been finalized, but will be available on the FAO website.

Opening remarks from Peter Thompson, UN Special Envoy for the Ocean, described his view that, on a global scale, oceans are in trouble, which underscores the important role of RFMOs. He noted that they lacked financial resources to perform their mission. He also called for development of indicators to track progress at achieving sustainable resource development goals, and called for additional establishment protected areas to comprise 10% for nearshore resource conservation.

Progress in Implementation of the Code of Responsible Fishery Conduct - The Committee discussed reporting on implementation of the Code. The US, with support from numerous other countries, maintained that the function of FAO was to collect information on “responsible” fisheries, but not to judge compliance. Under this agenda item, Norway raised

their concerns about the impact of post-harvest losses, and their interest in reducing that wastage. Canada noted that FAO terminology seems to imply that bycatch is unsustainable, and cited several examples of bycatch in sustainable fisheries, arguing that the FAO needs to be more careful with their terminology.

Trade – Numerous parties expressed concern about increasing market access requirements and their concern that these would become barriers to trade. The discussion about trade was positive, with focus on increasing the access that developing nations have to the global trade market, and preventing trade in IUU products while maintaining open markets.

Aquaculture – Was generally recognized as important for a broad range of benefits in developed nations as well as developing nations, and essential to fill a growing gap in global seafood supply. The Committee supported the Blue Growth Initiative, called for more work on biosecurity and antimicrobial resistance, and recommended FAO develop sustainable aquaculture guidelines for implementation of best practices.

IUU – The Committee called for additional support for implementation of the port states measures agreement (the US has implemented it) as it is an essential element in combatting IUU. The Global Record became operational; it is expected to facilitate enforcement against IUU. The Committee requested better estimates of magnitude and trends to determine whether enforcement efforts are succeeding and strengthening RFMO capabilities. There was considerable discussion, in the plenary and in side sessions, of the connections of IUU with labor abuses and gear abandonment. The US noted and welcomed broadscale acceptance of tools to combat IUU, even by nations that were formerly opposed. There seemed to be a consensus that IUU work during the next two years should focus on implementation of the measures that have been developed, instead of developing big new measures.

Small scale and artisanal fisheries – 2022 is the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture; the Committee supported FAO involvement in planning. The Committee noted the need for increased data collection on this sector, and increased reporting in SOFIA, and expects that the report from the Hidden Harvest 2 Initiative, expected in 202, will help fill this gap. The Committee acknowledged the value of traditional knowledge in understanding SSF. COFI also supports the Global Work Programme to Advance Knowledge on Rights-based Approaches for Fisheries, and their importance in reducing conflict and achieving food security. The Committee supported the FAO role as policy neutral on development of rights based approaches, concentrating on providing support and knowledge base. A repository on rights based management to be launched later in 2018. Addressing gender diversity was frequently mentioned; many countries described the important role that women have in many SSF and called for a greater role in management.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – The Committee discussed progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14, and Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and encouraged FAO to play a continuing role in monitoring implementation but was concerned that FAO not engage in

determining compliance. The Committee noted the linkage between the SDG goals and the Blue Growth Initiative.

Climate Change – The Committee supported the recent FAO work on documenting the effects of climate change on fisheries and aquaculture, and noted the vulnerability of both to climate change. The US supported this work. COFI agreed to develop Guidelines on climate change, adaptation, and mitigation in fisheries and aquaculture

Biodiversity – FAO has been working on biodiversity mainstreaming and implementing a fisheries biodiversity plan in support of the Convention on Biological Diversity Post 2020 Biodiversity Framework, with Committee support.

Lost Fishing Gear- This issues received a lot of attention, both in plenary and in side sessions. The Committee supported FAO work on Abandoned, Lost or Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG), and expressed concern about its contribution to global plastic pollution problems and the impact of ghost fishing. The Committee endorsed voluntary guidelines on gear marking.

Marine Mammal Mortality Recommendations – The US supported these [recommendations](#) to reduce the mortality of marine mammals in fishery and aquaculture operations.

Trawl guidelines – Were a late addition to the discussion, and received comparatively little attention, and no action was taken so they are not included in the report. The EU supported the trawl guidelines, but noted that additional time is required to evaluate expert workgroup results. [The guidelines document](#) is directed at fisheries in southeast Asia/Latin America/Africa, and includes general references to what might constitute best practices for trawl gear, but does not present specifics. It does acknowledge the importance of trawl gear in harvesting large quantities of seafood.

Marine debris - Considerable emphasis on marine debris, particularly plastics (micro beads and single use plastics). COFI endorsed the voluntary guidelines for gear marking and the recommendations from the Technical Consultation since lost gear contributes to marine debris, and supported further emphasis on pollutants including plastics, biodiversity, marine mammal bycatch and considering bycatch of turtles and sharks as well.

New subcommittee on Fisheries Management – Norway proposed, and after some informal discussion and modification, the US and the other Committee members agreed, to examine the feasibility of establishing a third COFI subcommittee on fisheries management. COFI has two subcommittees already, on trade and aquaculture. The new subcommittee would provide COFI with ability to have a greater focus on SSF and artisanal fisheries, in addition to basic fishery management issues. All parties were conceptually supportive, with some reservations about how smaller countries would be able to cover an additional forum.

FAO work plan – The COFI recommended priorities for FAO for the next biennium. The Blue Growth Initiative is #3, above FAO strategic objectives and just below CCRF implementation. #5 is SDG indicators, #6 is guidelines for sustainable aquaculture, #7 climate change adaptation

and mitigation, #8 value chain address loss/waste and certification, #9 biological diversity on high seas #10 global symposium on sustainability. COFI supports Blue Growth with request for more detail and not lose track of basic fishery management objectives. IUU efforts, including estimation of extent of IUU. Mainstream climate change into work plan. More work on sustainable aquaculture guidelines. Support gear marking efforts. Support data collection, post-harvest loss and waste, further marine mammal bycatch before technical consultation, promote youth and women in sector,

Next meeting

COFI will meet again in 2020 in Rome, likely in the third quarter. I recommend that Councils use the CCC in advance of the meeting to consider likely agenda items and provide guidance to the Council representative in the US delegation. A CCC discussion of the likely key issues would prove of value in this context, and enable the Council representative to participate with more depth of knowledge on the range of issues. Without this advance preparation, it is difficult for a Council representative to address the full range of issues for all eight Councils. I also recommend the CCC provide a post-COFI opportunity for the Council representative, maybe in partnership with the NMFS lead, to provide an overview of the results.