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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-seventh Session

Amman, Jordan, 5-8 February 2024 and 4-5 March 2024

Report on the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI)

Executive Summary

The twelfth session of the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI) was held from 27 to 29 November 2023 in Jeddah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The session was attended by 35 participants, from all eight RECOFI Member Countries. The Commission reviewed the progress on the activities on the period 2022-2023 as well as the outcomes of relevant international and regional meetings.

The Commission noted that a number of key and emerging issues in fisheries and aquaculture, climate change impacts, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and aquaculture biosecurity are important to be regularly considered by the Commission and through its subsidiary bodies, the Working Group on Fisheries Management (WGFM) and the Working Group on Aquaculture (WGA).

Additionally, the Commission commended the efforts of the WGA and the WGFM and endorsed their outcomes and recommendations; it reviewed the progress on its three binding recommendations and gave advice on progressing with their implementation. The Commission adopted a programme of work for the upcoming biennium, with an estimated budget for activities of USD 305 000.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to:

- note the activities, including the programme of work anticipated to be implemented in the upcoming biennium, in terms of the role the Commission plays in ensuring sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the RECOFI area;
- note the emerging issues of relevance for RECOFI, including climate change, IUU fishing and the role RECOFI plays in ensuring regional collaboration on important emerging issues; and
- consider the scope of the programme of work to be undertaken by the RECOFI Secretariat, with limited human resources.

Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:

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I. Introduction

1. The twelfth session of the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI) was held from 27 to 29 November 2023 in Jeddah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The session was attended by 35 participants, from eight RECOFI member countries: Bahrain, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Additionally, as well as from the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE), the FAO Subregional Office for the Gulf Cooperation Council States and Yemen (SNG), FAO Subregional Office for the North Africa (SNE), and the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division in FAO headquarters, as well as participation from the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME), the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), as well from two observer countries, Pakistan and Yemen, and two observers from the Arab League.
2. The Commission adopted the agenda and re-elected Mr Ali Al-Shaikhi, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as Chairperson, Mr Abdulaziz Said Al-Marzooqi, the Sultanate of Oman, as first Vice-Chairperson and Mr Abdulaziz Mohammed Al-Dehaimi, the State of Qatar, as second Vice-Chairperson.

II. REPORT ON THE FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE AFFAIRS OF THE COMMISSION FOR THE INTERSESSIONAL PERIOD 2022-2023

3. The Commission was reminded of the functions of the Secretariat and the key role of the technical support received from the relevant units in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division of FAO headquarters. The commission reviewed the activities undertaken in the intersessional period, as well as meetings at which RECOFI was represented.
4. The Commission was informed of the financial state of RECOFI, noting that at the last session, it was agreed that annual contributions would be raised to USD 25 000, and that as of now, the level of arrears had reached a peak level.
5. The Commission requested that the RECOFI Secretariat communicate the Programme of Work and Commission Budget, including the anticipated costs, in a letter to RECOFI member countries after the conclusion of the session.
6. The Commission appreciated the outcomes of the 35th Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) (5-9 September 2022, Rome, Italy, hybrid modality) and the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC) (10-13 January 2022, Baghdad, Iraq, hybrid modality) and an overview of the main outcomes of the 11th Session of RECOFI, which was held virtually from 25 to 27 October 2021.
7. The Commission noted the progress of the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)* and its potential implications for the fisheries sector. RECOFI noted that, while its coverage area is mostly a semi-enclosed sea and within its member countries Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), the BBNJ holds significance for RECOFI in terms of the important reliance of fisheries activities on marine biodiversity, connectivity between an EEZ and areas beyond national jurisdiction.
8. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia informed the Commission that they are currently reviewing the BBNJ agreement with a view to becoming a party.
9. RECOFI noted the updates on the World Trade Organization (WTO) *Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*, noting that on 17 June 2022, WTO members reached an agreement to prohibit certain fisheries subsidies and agreed to continue negotiations on outstanding issues, including the long-debated issue on the extent of flexibilities offered in special and differential treatment (SDT) provisions and the scope of exceptions to certain subsidies.

10. The Commission noted the importance of this agreement and was informed that a number of RECOFI member countries participated in the negotiations and are currently reviewing this Agreement to determine the impacts of becoming a party.
11. The Commission recognized that some of the outstanding matters to be discussed relating to small-scale fisheries are important considerations in becoming a party. Further, the Commission noted that it may be clear how to remove subsidies related to vessels engaging in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; however, addressing subsidies that contribute to overfishing is difficult to manage in complex multi-gear, multi-species fisheries.
12. The Commission further noted the recommendations and outcomes from the Review Conference on the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (UNFSA) (22-26 May 2023).
13. The Commission recognized that two RECOFI members are party to the UNFSA (the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IR)).

III. Report of the Working Group on Aquaculture

14. The Commission reviewed the activities that took place under the Working Group on Aquaculture (WGA) in the previous intersessional period: 1) Joint RECOFI and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) workshop on allocated zones for aquaculture (AZA) Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman, 19-20 March 2023; 2) Workshop on enhancing knowledge on Aquatic Health Management and Biosecurity and Understanding of Antimicrobial Resistance in Aquaculture, National Aquaculture Group (NAQUA), Jeddah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 10-13 July 2023, and the 10th Meeting of the RECOFI Working Group on Aquaculture (WGA), held 6-7 November 2023, virtually.
15. The Commission endorsed the recommendation of the WGA for climate change and aquaculture biosecurity to be added as standing agenda items to meetings of the WGA.
16. The Commission noted the WGA proposal to decide on the way forward on the Regional Aquaculture Information System (RAIS) and the need to ensure continuity and financial support. The Commission recognized the importance of RAIS being hosted in a RECOFI member country, the State of Kuwait, and considered the following different options: 1) to upgrade RAIS with proper system updating and follow-up from the State of Kuwait; 2) to host it in a different country; or 3) to develop a system that could be hosted by FAO. The Commission agreed that the State of Kuwait should review the requirements for continued hosting, the costs associated, confirm if they can make the needed upgrades to continue to host, and update RECOFI Secretariat accordingly.

IV. Report of the Working Group on Fisheries Management

17. The Commission reviewed the activities that took place under the Working Group on Fisheries Management (WGFM) in the previous intersessional period, including the recommendations that the WGFM put forward for consideration to the Commission.
18. The Commission endorsed that climate change be added as a standing item to the agenda of meetings of the WGFM and noted that capacity building on integrating climate change into sustainable fisheries management, particularly on stock assessment, is a key matter to be addressed.
19. The Commission further agreed that the updated Minimum Data Reporting (MDR)/FIRMS/Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14.4.1 focal points will be sent to the RECOFI Secretariat.
20. Further, the Commission agreed that it would be useful to have a scientific review available encompassing and compiling the scientific knowledge that has been accrued since the past, through fishery research work, on the RECOFI priority species and their stocks occurring in the RECOFI area

of competence. The review will be based on published results from the research work of the eight RECOFI members including the available so-called grey literature, often of value and relevance but poorly known. The review is expected to produce summaries of available information on the biology, life history, and fishery exploitation parameters of the RECOFI priority species.

V. Sustainable Ocean Initiative Global Dialogue with Regional Seas Organizations and Regional Fisheries Bodies (SOI), and relevant cooperation between RECOFI and ROPME

21. The Commission noted the outcomes of the most recent 3rd meeting of the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI) Global Dialogue with Regional Seas Organizations and Regional Fisheries Bodies (25-28 October 2022),

22. The Commission further noted that the previous Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) had expired, but that the two secretariats had communicated and agreed to proceed with a new MoU.

23. The Commission noted with approval the intervention from ROPME reiterating the interest to update the formalized cooperation between ROPME and RECOFI on initiatives of common interest that build on the previous cooperation.

24. The document RECOFI/XII/2023/10 was introduced, highlighting the implementation status of the three RECOFI binding recommendations.

Recommendation RECOFI/6/2011/1 on Minimum Data Reporting in the RECOFI Area

25. The Commission was informed of the status of the implementation of the Recommendation *RECOFI/6/2011/1 on Minimum Data Reporting in the RECOFI Area*.

26. The Commission appreciated the work that FAO Information and Knowledge Management Team (NFISI) had undertaken on the pilot regional database, and related activities, and supported their continued development, as planned. Further, the Commission endorsed the recommendations of the WGFM at its 13th meeting related to this recommendation, specifically the Commission:

- a. Endorsed the WGFM proposal for the MDR template and revised list of indicators to be adopted ad interim with trials for two years to test its feasibility and any needs for refinements.
- b. Endorsed the revised Priority Species List with the additions and deletions.
- c. Encouraged RECOFI members to complete the work on the RECOFI stocks and fisheries inventory published in FIRMS in collaboration with the RECOFI Secretariat.
- d. Confirmed that the Chairperson of the WGFM would act as the regional FIRMS focal point.

27. The Commission agreed to task the WGFM on a possible revision of the Recommendation *RECOFI/6/2011/1* considering recent developments on the MDR and closely related knowledge frameworks supporting evidence-based management.

Recommendation RECOFI/8/2015/1 Minimum Reporting on Aquaculture Data and Information

28. The Commission reviewed the implementation of the Recommendation *RECOFI/8/2015/1 Minimum Reporting on Aquaculture Data and Information*, including the proposals by the WGA at its 10th meeting.

29. The Commission agreed that the RECOFI Secretariat should liaise with FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Statistics Team (NFISS) to explore how FAO's questionnaire could potentially become a joint FAO-RECOFI questionnaire to include the request of any additional information required in the Recommendation that is determined important to be collected.

30. The Commission also endorsed the recommendation of the WGA to review Recommendation *RECOFI/8/2015/1* to consider the data that should be collected under this recommendation to determine which data is available and useful for RECOFI member countries.

Implementation status of the Recommendation RECOFI/X/2019/1 on the Assessment and Management of Kingfish (*Scomberomorus commerson*) stocks in the RECOFI Area

31. The Commission reviewed the implementation status of the Recommendation RECOFI/X/2019/1 on the Assessment and Management of Kingfish (*Scomberomorus commerson*) stocks in the RECOFI Area, including that the Secretariat had initiated a partnership with KAUST to undertake the second regional stock assessment.

32. The Commission reiterated the need to undertake this stock assessment exercise and agreed that a virtual meeting should be held in January 2024, prior to the stock assessment workshop, to discuss the data structure and expected results.

33. The Commission urged RECOFI member countries to submit all relevant and available data that will facilitate this stock assessment.

VI. PROGRAMME OF WORK AND COMMISSION BUDGET FOR 2024-2025

34. The Commission endorsed the activities below to be undertaken in the upcoming intersessional period, with an estimated budget for activities of USD 305 000”

- a. *2nd Regional joint assessment of kingfish stock*
- b. *Workshop to address IUU fishing in the RECOFI area*
- c. *1-1 Meetings on the MDR data submission template*
- d. *Workshop on the regional database and finalization of MDR submission format*
- e. *Review of the Recommendation “RECOFI/6/2011/1 on Minimum Data Reporting in the RECOFI Area (MDR)”*
- f. *Climate change, acidification and marine pollution impacts on fisheries in the RECOFI region*
- g. *Review of current knowledge on priority stocks in the RECOFI area, including a Preliminary assessment of priority stocks through an ad-hoc group of experts*
- h. *14th meeting of the WGFM*
- i. *Workshop to address climate change and aquaculture in an exhibition with the private sector on recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS) technology developments*
- j. *Review of Recommendation “RECOFI/8/2015/1 Minimum Reporting on Aquaculture Data and Information in data collection”*
- k. *Develop guidelines for the reinforcement of management and planning for sustainable aquaculture in the RECOFI area*
- l. *Diagnostics training course on common cultured organisms diseases in RECOFI area*
- m. *Prioritize the important cultured species in the region and develop a risk profile for these specific species in order to engage in contingency planning (back-to-back with diagnostics training)*
- n. *Update the RECOFI Regional Aquatic Organisms Health (ROAH) Strategy*
- o. *11th meeting of the WGA*
- p. *13th Session of RECOFI*

35. The following items were presented and discussed under *Any Other Matters*:

- a. Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement;
- b. FAO’s Blue Transformation Initiative;
- c. Fisheries in Pakistan;
- d. Fisheries in Yemen.

36. The Commission agreed that the 13th Session of RECOFI will be held from 19 to 21 May 2025, and hosted by the Sultanate of Oman.

37. The report was adopted by the Commission on 29 November 2023.

VII. Summary of recommendations

38. The twelfth session of the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI) was held from 27 to 29 November 2023 in Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The session was attended by 35 participants, from all eight RECOFI Member Countries, as well as from the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (RNE), FAO Sub-regional Offices (SNG) and (SNE), and the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division in FAO Headquarters, as well as participation from the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME), as well as from two observer countries, Pakistan and Yemen and two observers from Arab League.
39. The Commission reviewed the progress on the activities on the period 2022-2023 and recognized the importance of a number of matters when discussing its vision for RECOFI, including:
- a. Recognizing the significance of a number of recently concluded international agreements such as the *Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction* (BBNJ Agreement) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) *Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*.
 - b. The Commission agreed that a number of key and emerging issues in fisheries and aquaculture: climate change impacts, IUU fishing and aquaculture biosecurity should be regularly considered by the Commission.
 - c. The Commission recognized the importance of the Regional Aquaculture Information System (RAIS) and considered the following different options moving forward: to upgrade RAIS with proper system updating and follow-up from the State of Kuwait, to host it in a different country, or develop a system that could be hosted by FAO.
 - d. The Commission agreed that it would be useful to have a scientific review available encompassing and compiling the scientific knowledge on the RECOFI priority species and their stocks occurring in the RECOFI area of competence.
 - e. The Commission agreed that RECOFI and the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) would proceed with developing an MoU for cooperation.
40. In relation to policy and regulatory matters, the Commission:
- a. Commended the efforts of the WGA and the WGFM and endorsed their outcomes and recommendations, including adding climate change as a standing agenda item to the meetings of both groups, adding IUU fishing as a standing item to the WGFM, and biosecurity as a standing item to the meetings of the WGA.
 - b. Recommendation *RECOFI/6/2011/1 on Minimum Data Reporting in the RECOFI Area*, the Commission appreciated the work that the FAO Information and Knowledge Management Team (NFISI) had undertaken on the pilot regional database, and related activities and supported their continued development, as planned. Further, the Commission endorsed the recommendations of the WGFM, at its 13th meeting, related to this recommendation.
 - c. Regarding Recommendation *RECOFI/X/2019/1 on the Assessment and Management of Kingfish (Scomberomorus commerson) stocks in the RECOFI Area*, the Commission noted that the Secretariat had initiated a partnership with KAUST to undertake the second regional stock assessment, reiterated the need to undertake this stock assessment exercise, and agreed that a virtual meeting should be held in January 2024, prior to the stock assessment workshop, to discuss the data structure and expected results.
 - d. Regarding Recommendation *RECOFI/8/2015/1 Minimum Reporting on Aquaculture Data and Information*, the Commission endorsed the recommendation of the WGA to review Recommendation RECOFI/8/2015/1 to consider the data that should be collected under this Recommendation to determine which data is available and useful for RECOFI member countries.
41. In relation to programme and budget matters:

- a. The Commission adopted a programme of work for the upcoming biennium, with an estimated budget for activities of USD 305 000.
- b. The Commission highlighted that it would be useful to be informed of the expenditures at a more detailed level to further understand the costs associated with the activities and operations. The Commission requested that the RECOFI Secretariat communicate the Programme of Work and Commission Budget, including the anticipated costs, in a letter to RECOFI member countries after the conclusion of the session.