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Title:	Implementation of the Regional framework on aquatic biosecurity and National Aquatic Biosecurity Plans
Author(s):	Kevin Ellard, Aquatic Biosecurity Specialist Jamie Whitford, Mariculture Specialist Timothy Pickering, Principal Aquaculture Advisor Ariella D'Andrea, Legal Advisor

Summary:

Effective biosecurity assists in safeguarding local food production and access to markets, both of which are needed to increase economic resilience and decrease dependence on food imports within the Pacific. It is for this reason that Fisheries Ministers reiterated the need for development of aquatic biosecurity capacity at the recent Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM3) held in August 2022.

The Pacific Community (SPC) is facilitating the development of aquatic biosecurity capacity through the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework. This framework provides guidance on development and implementation of biosecurity policies at a regional level. In addition, SPC is working with its members to develop effective national aquatic biosecurity plans using principles outlined in the Framework.

Implementation of biosecurity planning at a practical level has been delayed by COVID, so it is now timely to reassess progress and develop a way forward. Participants will be invited to share experiences and learnings encountered when formulating or implementing national biosecurity plans. This feedback will be used to identify the priority areas requiring further support.

Recommendations and outcomes:

Members are invited to:

a) ***Note*** the progress made in regional aquatic biosecurity to-date.

b) ***Note*** that safeguarding local food production through increased biosecurity is recognised as a priority by Fisheries Ministers.

c) ***Share*** experiences and learnings about progress, and priority needs, to (i) formulate, and (ii) implement national aquatic biosecurity plans, to inform the mid-term review of the Framework's 2020-25 Regional Action Plan.

The Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework

1. Aquatic biosecurity is key to improved fish production, the facilitation of trade, and protection of the rich diversity of the aquatic environment found throughout the Pacific region. The aquaculture sector is increasing in economic relevance for both local communities and the Pacific region.

2. To achieve sustainable development, it is essential that farmed aquatic species remain free of disease so that the region can build on its disease-free status. Implementation of aquatic biosecurity planning improves business confidence by strengthening regional supply chains required by aquaculture and providing greater assurance of quality product being available to markets. Being able to demonstrate pathogen and pest free status will assist Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) to access international markets. Biosecurity also helps maintain stock welfare and environmental standards through improved feed efficiency and lowered nutrient outputs into the environment.

3. A proposal for development of regional aquatic biosecurity was presented to the 3rd SPC Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries (RTMCF3) as item IP5: Regional Action Plan on Aquatic Biosecurity – issues and challenges. RTMCF3 IP5 outlined development of a framework considered necessary to facilitate implementation of coherent biosecurity policies. This document was subsequently endorsed by RTMCF.

4. The Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity (the Framework) was developed by the Aquaculture Section of SPC FAME and endorsed by SPC Heads of Fisheries in 2020. The Framework maintains the four key objectives originally proposed in IP5.
    - **Objective 1: Governance.** To harmonise, develop and promote enforcement of coherent national aquatic biosecurity policies, regulations, procedures, and practices.
    - **Objective 2: Practices.** To improve aquatic biosecurity practices and infrastructure at the national level.
    - **Objective 3: Transfer of aquatic species.** To ensure responsible use and control of aquatic species translocations and introductions in the context of aquaculture activities, through the development and implementation of standardised import risk analysis procedures.
    - **Objective 4: Training and cooperation.** A coherent regional approach to capacity building, coordination and collaboration in aquatic health and biosecurity, with reference to diagnosis, surveillance, reporting, quarantine, border control and the prioritising of research and development activities.

5. The Framework also includes a regional workplan (pp. 8-11) that focusses on (i) aquatic animal health management and (ii) the safe translocation of aquatic species, with the specific objective of enhancing regional aquaculture production.

6. The Framework is complemented by SPC Policy Brief #34: The importance of aquatic biosecurity for the Pacific Islands region which highlights the relevance of aquatic biosecurity for PICTs, summarises the key messages, and recommends key policy actions.

7. Food safety, invasive marine species, and diseases affecting aquatic plants, are examples of biosecurity items not currently prioritised in the Framework's regional workplan but have the potential to be addressed within other projects or future strategies.

High-level support for the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework

8. Following endorsement at the 12th SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting the Framework has now received broad support from PICT members. In addition, when the ongoing Regional Aquaculture Strategy (RAS) was discussed at the Third Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM3) on 25 August 2022, Ministers emphasised the need to consider aquatic biosecurity in future planning. This call by Ministers for increased capacity in aquatic biosecurity demonstrates willingness to progress with the workplan as a priority.

9. Achieving stated objectives within the Framework also requires political commitment by individual PICT governments and administrations. Statutory arrangements differ between PICTs in terms of legislative powers and responsibility, but livestock disease and biosecurity have traditionally been the responsibility of veterinary services located within departments of primary industry or agriculture. In contrast, aquatic species are normally the responsibility of fisheries authorities. Depending on the PICT involved, legislative authorities may need to establish communication networks and clearly determine roles and responsibilities to ensure that appropriate biosecurity requirements are met.

Some indicators of progress

10. The Framework envisaged a six-year action plan (2020–2025), of which the key steps were:
    - Implement the workplan,
    - Review progress against the workplan at the annual SPC RTMCF,
    - Assist PICTs in sourcing specific funding for in-country implementation,
    - Conduct a mid-term review in June 2022, and
    - Prepare a 2025–2030 plan during 2025.

    COVID restrictions and the lack of a dedicated aquatic biosecurity specialist within SPC have delayed the schedule from 2020 to mid-2022. Now that COVID restrictions are easing and the aquatic biosecurity role recently filled, it is timely to revisit the workplan and discuss process for moving forward. As a first step, we need to determine what progress has been made by individual PICTs and evaluate future needs.

11. Indicators that progress is being made may include:

    - The development of legislation (laws and regulations) and policies (national strategies and action plans) aimed at establishing aquatic biosecurity protocols.
    - The establishment of biosecurity authorities with specific roles identified as being responsible for aquatic biosecurity issues.
    - The development of standards for import/export of aquatic products and live aquatic organisms.
    - The establishment of MOUs between jurisdictional authorities on roles and responsibilities.

Status of national Aquatic Biosecurity Plans among SPC members

12. National aquatic biosecurity plans have been produced by six PICTs, however a number of these are in draft form or are scheduled for review.

13. Each of the existing plans provides a general overview of aquatic biosecurity for the relevant PICT and undertakes a SWAT analysis aimed at identifying biosecurity strengths, weaknesses, potential threats, and opportunities. They also outline agreed regulatory frameworks and

identify key aquatic biosecurity stakeholders. An agreed workplan and implementation strategy, including monitoring and evaluation, are also included in each.

14. A key task for the SPC Aquatic Biosecurity Specialist will be to liaise with relevant authorities to review and renew relevant strategies and to work closely with those PICTs wishing to develop national aquatic biosecurity strategies.

Review of aquatic biosecurity legislation among PICTs

15. The SPC Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture Program (CFAP) is currently preparing a comparative study reviewing national aquatic biosecurity laws and policies in 14 PICTs against the current Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework and applicable international standards. The review focuses on the aquatic standards adopted by the World Organization for Animal Health, summarised in a checklist that will be annexed to the study for other countries' use.

16. The study provides an overview of national legislation on aquaculture and biosecurity in each country or territory, identifying competent authorities, aquaculture regulations, aquatic disease control, domestic transfer of aquatic organisms, import and export standards for live aquatic organisms, including health certification and risk analysis. It also includes a brief review of environmental and maritime legislation dealing with the unintended introduction aquatic organisms, the control of invasive species, and regulations on biofouling and ballast waters.

Implementation issues and challenges

17. Discussions at RTMCFA3 identified that key challenges to development of aquatic biosecurity were,
    - The limited technical, human, or financial resources available to PICTs,
    - A lack of baseline information on pests and diseases of concern, and
    - Limited legislative powers or unclear policies relating to aquatic species.

18. A requirement for better inter-agency communication and ongoing political commitment was also identified (discussed in paragraph 9).

19. After considering the summary Framework in IP5, RTMCFA3 decided upon the following actions:
    - *Action 15* "Members request SPC to provide technical assistance, resources and capacity-building in aquatic biosecurity planning, implementation and development of protocols".
    - *Action 16* "RTMCF encourages PICT governments and administrations to share national

      aquatic biosecurity strategies, legislation, policies, and plans, and provide resources in order

      to capture the benefits of effective biosecurity at the national level.
    - *Action 17* "RTMCF requests that technical assistance and capacity building in aquatic biosecurity in the Pacific region shall include actions in support of improved food safety, such as in ciguatera outbreaks, seafood poisoning, and zoonoses from seafood-borne pathogens" (notwithstanding the Framework's recommended focus on two main issues, as described in paragraph 5).

20. The Framework calls for a mid-term review of the Regional Action Plan in 2022. This review has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as indeed has progress to implement the Plan

at both regional and national levels. CFAP can commence a review, and a process to develop next steps within the context of the Regional Aquaculture Strategy (as called-for by Ministers at RFMM3), starting now in today's Break-Out Group.

Break-Out Groups: Addressing aquatic biosecurity implementation issues and challenges

Break-Out Group Questions

1. Do you have any learning or experience in developing a national aquatic biosecurity plan? If so, please share.
2. Based on your experience, what are the priority areas for the implementation of aquatic biosecurity plans at the national level? If implementation has not occurred, what challenges do you anticipate?
3. Do you consider limiting the scope to aquatic animal health and translocation appropriate, or should this be expanded (e.g. include aquatic plant diseases and pests, food safety, genetic pollution)?
4. Does your country/territory have adequate laws and regulations to address aquatic biosecurity issues and procedures?

Participants may find it useful to work through the Deliverables table in the Workplan contained within the Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity, to help identify and prioritise the implementation needs.