

Several FFA member priorities were met at WCPFC12

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From 3–8 December 2015, the Twelfth Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC12) was held in Bali, Indonesia. Over 500 delegates attended, representing 25 Commission Members, 6 Participating Territories, 7 Cooperating Non-Members, 8 Inter-Governmental Observers and 22 NGO Observers. This was the first regular session under the new leadership of Ms Rhea Moss-Christian (Chair) and Mr Feleti Teo (Executive Director).

Three of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) members' identified four top priorities were achieved at the meeting. First, WCPFC12 yielded adoption of a target reference point for skipjack of 50% of unfished spawning biomass, which is in line with current catch and effort levels. To reach consensus, FFA members and Japan compromised on language in the text of the measure to address Japan's concerns about range contraction and localized depletion, which they believe is negatively impacting on Japan's coastal skipjack tuna fishery. This outcome is a positive step forward for management of WCPO's skipjack resources and is also critical for the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA)'s Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification for free-school skipjack, which requires a target reference point for skipjack to be adopted as a condition of certification by end 2016.

Second, the Conservation and Management Measure (CMM) 2014-06 tasked WCPFC12 to establish a formal framework (i.e. a work plan and indicative timeframes) for the development of harvest strategies for the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO)'s key fisheries and stocks. While WCPFC12 adopted a work plan, given several concerns raised by China and Japan, some elements of the work plan that were not agreed upon will be carried forward for re-consideration at WCPFC13 (2016).

Third, a new two-year compliance monitoring measure – designed to assess the level of implementation and compliance of members – was adopted and will be independently reviewed at the end of 2017. Given the Charter Notification Scheme (CMM 2012-05) expired at the end of 2015, WCPFC12 agreed to extend the scheme for another three years with no changes to the existing arrangements (now CMM 2015-05).

FFA members' fourth priority area, a target reference point for albacore, was not achieved. Strong opposition was voiced by China and Chinese Taipei to FFA Members' proposal to establish an interim target reference point for South Pacific albacore of 45% of unfished

spawning biomass. While the 2015 stock assessment for albacore indicates that stocks are still not biologically overfished, FFA members have called for strengthened best practice management which will not only maintain the biological health of the fishery, but economic viability as well. A number of FFA members have domestic South Pacific albacore longline industries that have suffered significantly over the past several years due to competition from a large influx of subsidised Chinese longline vessels. China and Chinese Taipei opposed the 37% reduction in albacore catches required to achieve the 45% target reference point, on the grounds that there is no biological or scientific rationale for cutbacks. The only positive outcome for albacore was a minor revision to the current conservation and management measure (CMM 2010-05) with members agreeing to provide vessel-level data by species for 2006-2014 for all fleets operating in the South Pacific albacore fishery. These data will be useful for future stock assessments and assessing the effectiveness of CMM 2010-05 (now CMM 2015-02). No agreement was reached on FFA members' proposal to strengthen the measure to ensure that the number of fishing vessels operating in the fishery does not exceed the 2000–2004 average (or 2005) levels (as per CMM 2010-05) and so that compliance with the measure can be effectively assessed.

Little to no progress was made on other substantive issues, most notably, the conservation and management measure for tropical tunas (skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye). Despite bigeye's continued precarious stock status (overfished and overfishing occurring) and a scientific recommendation that additional or alternative measures for purse seine and longline are required to reduce bigeye mortality by 36% to bring the stock back in line with maximum sustainable yield (MSY), there was no consensus on revisions to CMM 2014-01 to further strengthen management measures. Strongly ingrained positions were maintained between the purse seine/longline sectors and coastal states/distant water fishing nations. PNA and Tokelau (PNA+) tabled a proposal

along similar lines to that in 2014, which presented a 'package' of purse seine and longline measures.

PNA+ firmly maintains that the purse seine sector has borne a disproportionate conservation burden for big-eye through FAD measures already adopted, and that additional purse seine measures will only be agreed if additional longline measures are also put in place. However, distant water fishing nations with strong longline fishing interests (i.e. Taiwan, US, Japan, China) maintain that they will not accept additional measures as they have already implemented a 30% cut in longline bigeye catches in line with scientific advice, while purse seine bigeye catches continue to increase.

Despite the Chair and Executive Director stressing that status quo was not an option for tropical tunas (and other issues), plus strong efforts by the Chair during several small working group sessions including proposed textual revisions to progress discussions, no agreement was reached. In 2016, 2015 measures will be rolled-over, including the three month-FAD closure and fourth month FAD closure/total limit on FAD sets for the purse seine fishery, as well as bigeye catch limits for the longline fishery (CMM 2016-01). PNA members

have reiterated that given failure of WCPFC to reach agreement they will continue to apply their own measures within PNA waters including a FAD monitoring and charging scheme as well as the Longline Vessel Day Scheme in 2016.

Observer safety was a key discussion point during the course of WCPFC12, with FFA members stressing that observer safety is of paramount importance. WCPFC12 agreed that a conservation and management measure should be drafted for consideration by the Technical and Compliance Committee 12th Meeting (TCC12) and WCPFC13 on flag state responsibilities for observer safety incidents. WCPFC12 also adopted a process whereby coastal states' observer providers will pre-notify flag states of possible alleged infringements by their vessels, as well as new fields in WCPFC's Minimum Fields for the Regional Observer Program for observer safety at sea and emergency action plans.

Once again, consensus was not reached on strengthened management of enclosed and semi-enclosed high seas areas, port state measures for monitoring, control and surveillance or replacement of the 5% fin:carcass ratio for sharks, with fins required to be attached.



Release of a bigeye tuna fitted with an archival tag. Despite bigeye's continued precarious stock status (overfished and overfishing occurring), there was no consensus at WCPFC12 to further strengthen management measures for this species (image: Bruno Leroy, SPC).