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Title:	Future arrangements for SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting
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Summary:

During the 11<sup>th</sup> SPC Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meeting in 2019, it was agreed that the meeting would move from biennial to be convened annually. Meetings would occur at the SPC Headquarters in 2020 and 2021 on a two-year trial basis. The decision was made to support the Forum Leaders' decision in 2017 to have fisheries as a standing item on their agenda, and the associated Forum Fisheries Committee Ministers' agreement in 2018 to convene an annual a Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM), to discuss issues across the whole spectrum of fisheries and aquaculture.

This paper highlights lessons learnt from the subsequent annual SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings and seeks members' consideration and direction concerning arrangements for and options to strengthen future SPC HoF meetings.

Recommendations:

Members are invited to:

- a. **discuss** and **note** the lessons learnt and opportunities of hosting annual SPC HoF meetings as agreed to at HoF11;
- b. **discuss** and **consider** options proposed in this paper on the future arrangements of HoF meetings, including reaffirming its role and priorities, considering its frequency and timing, duration and approach, and options for development of the meeting's agenda;
- c. **note** that hosting SPC HoF and RTMCFA/CBFD annually requires substantial resourcing in staff time and meeting costs, and
- d. **note** the SPC preference to change meeting timing to ensure adequate preparations are made should members decide to continue annual face-to-face meetings.

## Background

1. In 2017, Forum Leaders agreed to make fisheries a standing agenda item for the Forum and recognised the importance of coastal fisheries.
2. At the 11th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting (HoF) in March 2019, members noted that HoF is the only regional forum for discussing and setting priorities for coastal fisheries and aquaculture.
3. The 11th SPC Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meeting recommended that the meeting should continue to focus on guiding the strategic direction and work-plan priorities of the SPC Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems Division (FAME) across all its work areas (oceanic fisheries, coastal fisheries, and aquaculture), with the outcomes reflected in SPC FAME Business Plan updates. In addition, the HoF meeting should consider strategic regional policy and governance issues that can be transmitted to the newly established Regional Fisheries Ministers' Meeting and, where appropriate, via Ministers to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meetings.
4. Heads of Fisheries also agreed to convene the meeting annually for an initial two-year trial period and to focus the agenda on decision points related to SPC FAME results and future priorities, regional coastal fisheries governance and policy matters, and emerging issues of concern.
5. At the Inaugural Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting in 2019, the annual approach to Heads of Fisheries was endorsed. At the same meeting Ministers also decided that a new approach to engaging non-state actors in coastal fisheries matters was required. At the 12<sup>th</sup> SPC Heads of Fisheries in 2020 the inclusion of the Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD) within the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA) was endorsed to take non-state actor engagement forward. This approach was endorsed at the 1<sup>st</sup> Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting in 2020.
6. From 2021 forward, the annual cycle of the inclusion of the Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD) within the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA) ensures the SPC HoF meeting provides a platform to communicate the voices of communities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-state actors (NSAs) to the Regional Fisheries Ministers' Meeting (RFMM) and, by extension, to Forum Leaders. This is important in raising coastal fisheries issues that require political support.
7. Coastal fisheries and aquaculture technical issues are dealt with by the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture, and its outcomes are forwarded to the subsequent Heads of Fisheries meeting for consideration.
8. The SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting now provides a unique platform for members to provide strategic direction to SPC FAME across all its activities (as highlighted in Figure 1 below). It also provides the key opportunity to identify and discuss strategic regional policy and governance issues to be transmitted to the Regional Fisheries Ministers' Meeting and, where appropriate, via Ministers to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meeting.

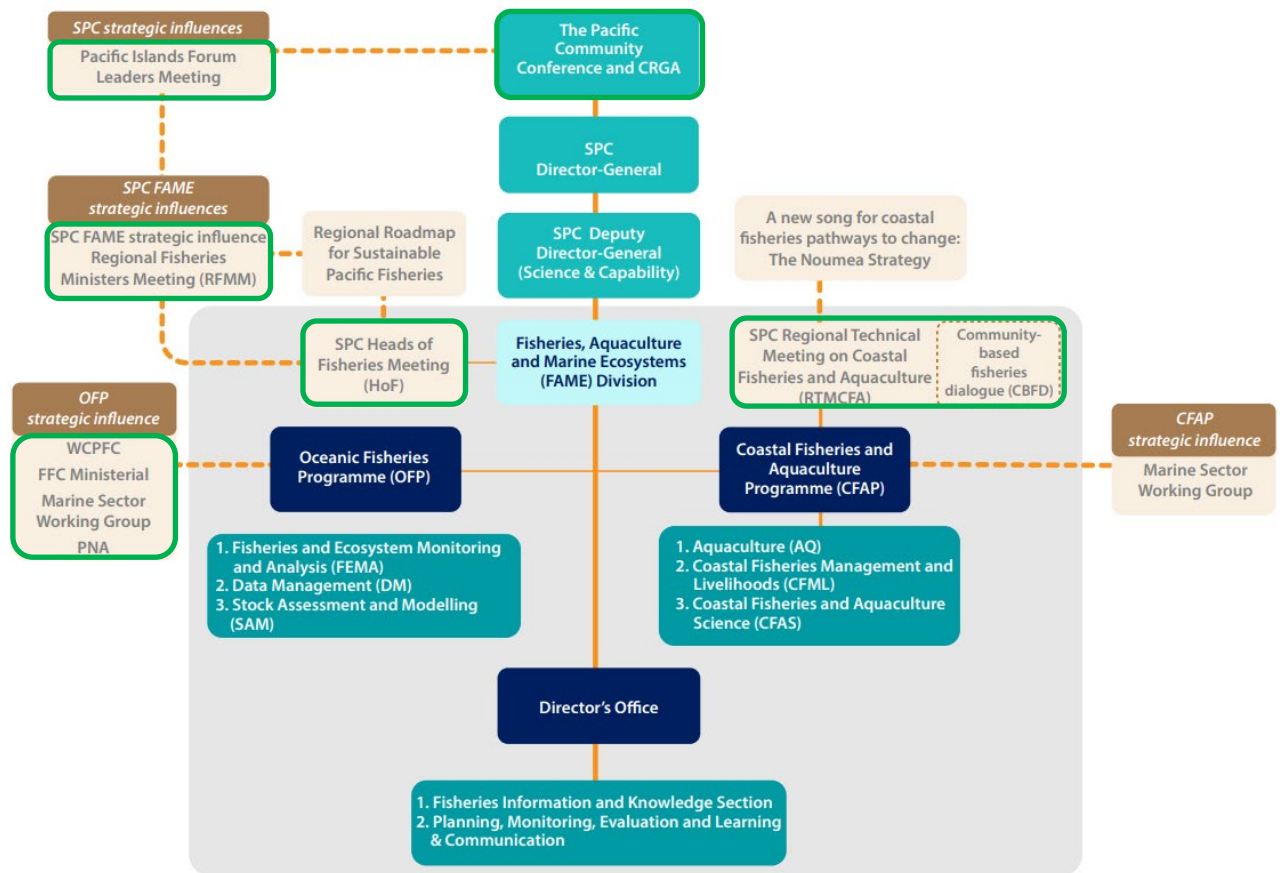


Figure 1: From SPC FAME Business Plan – key annual meetings and how they relate, including strategic influence (highlighted by boxes with a green outline) on SPC FAME’s work programmes and decision-making processes.

## Purpose of this paper

9. The purpose of this paper is to highlight lessons from the past three annual SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings and seek members’ consideration and direction concerning the purpose and arrangements for future Heads of Fisheries meetings.
10. Delivering annual, rather than biennial, HoF meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic provided both opportunities and challenges. Some key lessons and opportunities from the SPC HoF secretariat perspective are noted below for members to deliberate on during the 15<sup>th</sup> SPC Heads of Fisheries Meeting.

## How challenges were met, and the lessons learnt

### *Adapting to online delivery of HoF during COVID-19 pandemic*

11. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the oceanic and coastal fisheries and aquaculture activities of the Blue Pacific, with both expected and unexpected consequences, to which Heads of Fisheries needed to adapt. Additionally, the COVID-19 related impacts on

people movement, transport, and travel links placed critical operating constraints on work programmes, including SPC FAME's ability to host in-person meetings.

12. SPC FAME, with support from members and partners, was able to adapt and successfully deliver the SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings entirely online (virtually) via Zoom between 2020 and 2022, when travel restrictions were introduced by members and border restrictions were imposed as members addressed the COVID-19 pandemic.
13. Over the past three SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings, which were conducted virtually, more than 21 discussion papers were presented and discussed, leading to key outcomes aimed at addressing critical issues affecting fisheries and aquaculture in the Pacific region. Some of these issues included managing and responding to the impact of COVID-19 on food security and economic growth. A timeline and key decisions points are shown below.

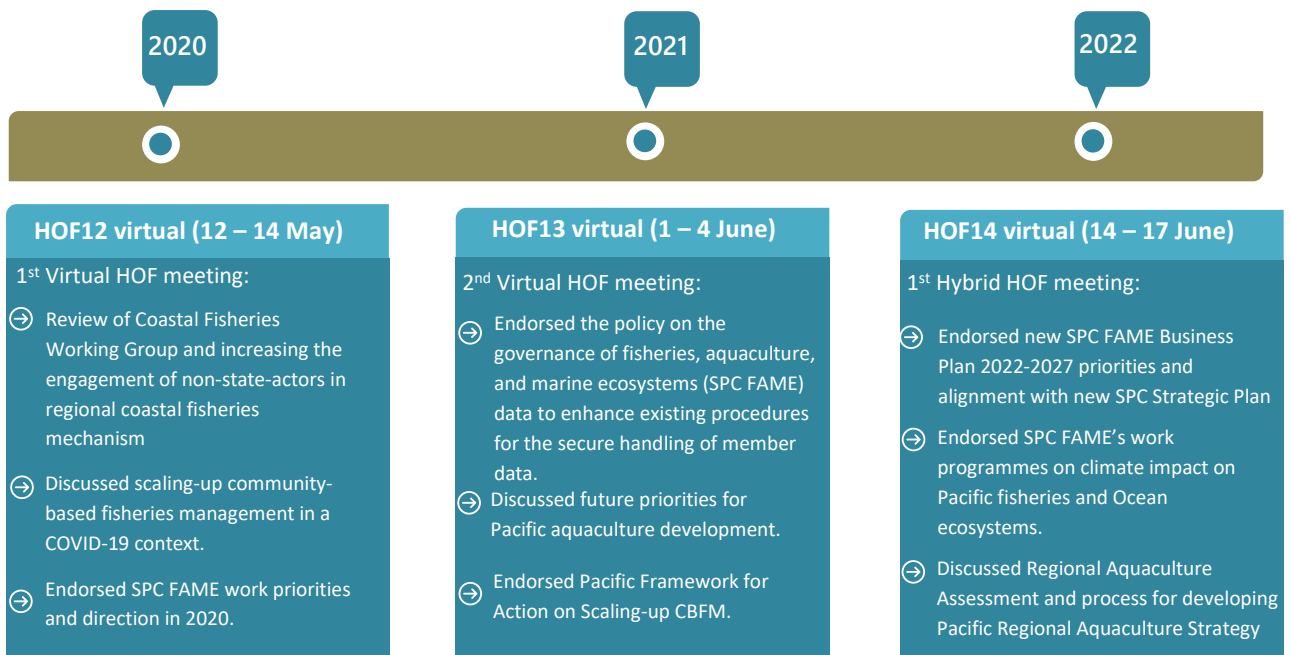


Figure 2: key decisions points in the past three SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings.

14. Some of the key achievements from the past three SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings during COVID-19 pandemic were:
  - a. The establishment of the Community-based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD) that replaced the Coastal Fisheries Working Group (CFWG). This body provides Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other Non-State Actors (NSAs) with a platform to offer advice and information on key needs to the Heads of Fisheries through the RTMCFA. This aims to inform Pacific Leaders on priority issues related to the sustainable use of coastal fisheries resources. The CBFD also serves as a space to share experiences and lessons from community-based initiatives to maintain productive and healthy ecosystems and associated fisheries resources, which are critical to the wellbeing of coastal communities.

- b. The policy on the governance of fisheries, aquaculture, and marine ecosystems (SPC FAME) data was established to enhance existing procedures for the secure handling of member data. This policy provides an overarching framework for the handling of SPC FAME data, covering areas such as data ownership, security, sharing, integration, and dissemination.
- c. Endorsement of SPC FAME's 2022-2027 business plan with a focus on ensuring sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture resources in the Pacific for economic growth, food security, and cultural and environmental conservation. The plan is guided by member priorities and aligned with SPC's Strategic Plan 2022-2031, with a commitment to implement all Key Focus Areas. The plan emphasises the integration of Pacific knowledge and enduring partnerships, inspired by the Pacific identity as navigators, discoverers, and fishers.
- d. The regional aquaculture assessment was conducted, which identified challenges limiting the extent of the contribution of the aquaculture sector to employment, food security, livelihoods, environmental protection, and economic growth. In response, HoF endorsed a process and timeline for the development of a Regional Aquaculture Strategy.
- e. Endorsement of SPC FAME's climate change work programmes and new regional climate initiatives for fisheries, including proposals to the Green Climate Fund and projects by the New Zealand Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. These initiatives required consultation with national agencies and other regional organisations to ensure they met the needs of SPC's members.

### *Purpose of SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting*

- 15. In 2019, during the 11th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting, it was acknowledged that fisheries play a crucial role in the blue economy, food systems, and livelihood enhancement, both in the region and globally. The meeting also recognised the growing number of fisheries-related events in the region and the expanding oceans agenda, as well as the importance of the Blue Pacific narrative.
- 16. At each subsequent meeting, members have continued to identify the HoF meeting as essential in advancing fisheries knowledge and coastal fisheries management in the region, especially on issues that require regional cooperation and support. It offers strategic guidance for the SPC FAME work programme and serves as a platform for SPC FAME to present its significant work and innovations to address members' scientific and technical needs. Additionally, it provides a space for members and partners to discuss critical issues that require financial and technical assistance.

### *Key lessons from the past three annual Heads of Fisheries meetings*

- 17. The crowded regional fisheries calendar of meetings has made it challenging for stakeholders to fully implement key outcomes and actions resulting from various meetings, and the new annual nature of the SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings, the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture, and the Regional Fisheries Ministers' Meetings added to that challenge.

18. The move to annual HoF and RTMCFA meetings resulted in a greater need for SPC staff time and resources, from logistics and organising meetings to writing working papers, information papers, and background papers. This added workload can negatively impact staff resources, diverting attention from delivering activities and supporting members, including implementing priority work areas approved by the SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting.
19. However, the annual HoF meeting has enabled greater reactivity to unexpected threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and allowed rapid adaptations to be discussed and developed.
20. The HoF14 meeting in 2022, which was the first hybrid meeting, had high travel costs for in-person participation, and logistical difficulties in bringing people to Noumea. The cost of hosting an annual in-person meeting is estimated to be around €250,000 per year, and higher costs are estimated for RTMCFA (including Cbfd). These costs will be affected by recent increases in flight and materials costs. The past three HoF meetings, including this year's, have been funded through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade programme funding, which also supports the RTMCFA and SPC's participation in the Regional Fisheries Ministers Meetings.
21. The experience gained through the fully virtual meetings performed in 2020 and 2021 is that the cognitive loads associated with online interaction are much greater. This is a result of the medium, and the higher number of fisheries officials participating when compared to an in-person meeting session. While the agenda of online HoF meetings was significantly adapted and reduced to reflect this, the online nature of the meetings still led to fatigue and reduced informal engagement among participants. Additionally, technical issues such as poor internet connectivity, poor sound and software glitches also disrupt the flow of the meeting and may create unease among the attendees. The lack of face-to-face interaction can also make it difficult to build relationships and establish trust among participants.
22. The past three HoF meetings have required more focused and shorter duration sessions over fewer days to adapt to time zone differences, limitations on long-duration high quality concentration, and technology and interpretation challenges. The increased workload – including the much larger number of SPC staff needed to effectively organise and support virtual meetings – has also contributed to time constraints on meeting agendas.
23. The annual HoF meeting is an important forum for SPC FAME, members, and stakeholders to discuss key issues, review progress, and develop strategies for sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture resources in the Pacific region. The outcomes of these meetings have been significant in shaping regional policies and frameworks, such as the Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling-up Community-based Fisheries Management and the Policy on the Governance of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Marine Ecosystem Data.
24. The SPC Heads of Fisheries (HoF) and the Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA), adapting to virtual formats, have become increasingly important and relevant during and post-COVID-19 in the Pacific region for several reasons. They allow for increased accessibility and inclusivity, are more cost-effective and efficient, more environmentally sustainable, and provide opportunities for increased collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Virtual HoF meetings have led to a more diverse range of voices being

heard, innovative solutions being shared more widely, and best practices being implemented more effectively.

25. Focusing on priority issues and limiting the number of hours on each day of the virtual HoF meetings helped maintain productive and meaningful discussions and encourage participation from high-level officials.

## Future arrangements of the SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting

26. The table below sets out some of the options that were put forward for consideration at the 11<sup>th</sup> SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting which remain relevant now, and new options for consideration on the arrangements for future SPC Heads of Fisheries meetings. These options are provided as guide, based on lessons learned from the past three Heads of Fisheries meetings, and alternative options or combination of options which could be considered.

HoF options for consideration	Notes
<b>Roles and priorities:</b>	
a. To review SPC FAME results achieved against the SPC FAME Business Plan	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> SPC FAME results presented to HoF.
b. To review, prioritise and endorse SPC FAME work priorities and emerging work areas	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> SPC FAME DO, OFP and CFAP present work priorities for the year and emerging work areas
c. To provide strategic direction to SPC FAME	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> Focus on SPC FAME’s strategic direction through Business Plan, guided by SPC Strategic Plan 2022-2031
d. To engage in planning and development of regional strategic approaches to Pacific fisheries and aquaculture	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> for example: regional aquaculture strategy, SPC FAME data policy
e. To provide members with a forum in which concerns can be raised, issues debated and priorities set by member countries and territories	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i>
f. To consider oceanic and coastal fisheries (including aquaculture) jointly	<i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> Consideration of more integrated approaches to fisheries and aquaculture issues

<p>g. To examine region-wide fisheries and aquaculture issues of concern</p>	<p><i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> Issues affecting many member countries and territories.</p> <p>SPC FAME Review (2017) “The HoF provides delegates with a forum in which concerns can be raised, issues debated, and priorities set by member countries.”</p>
<p>h. To examine sub-regional issues of concern</p>	<p><i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i> Issues affecting a sub-region, or can be more effectively addressed at a sub-regional level</p>
<p>i. To discuss and provide guidance on fisheries and aquaculture related input to the Pacific Oceans related issues (including SDG14)</p>	<p><i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i></p>
<p>j. To bring together member governments, donors, non-government, civil society, and other stakeholders to focus on Pacific regional fisheries and aquaculture issues of concern</p>	<p><i>Continue from HoF11 outcomes:</i></p>
<p><b>Structure – timing</b></p>	
<p>k. Keep to annual meetings – in-person</p>	<p>See lessons above – including increasing cost of hosting in-person annual meetings</p>
<p>l. Keep annual meetings – one year in-person and following year virtual (online via zoom) with reduced agenda</p>	<p>Recommended timing for HoF to consider</p>
<p>m. Return to biennial</p>	<p>Not recommended timing for HoF to consider</p>
<p>n. Reschedule from March each year to April</p>	<p>Enough time for SPC FAME staff and delegates to prepare after Christmas breaks.</p> <p>Feeds into SPC CRGA and ‘Regional Fisheries Ministers’ meetings.</p> <p>RTMCFA/CBFD will remain in October / November and feed into subsequent HoF</p>
<p><b>Structure – duration</b></p>	
<p>o. 3-day format, with 2 days for side-meetings</p>	<p>Consideration by HoF15</p>



p.	3-day format, with 1 day for side-meetings and 1 day for mini-workshops on key sub-regional issues	This was option put forward to HoF11
q.	Current HoF15 4-day format, with 1-day for side meetings	
<b>Structure – approach (both in-person and virtual)</b>		
r.	Keep the current format of presentations and more break-out group discussions	This was the format in HoF11 and continued in the past HoF meetings.
<b>Meeting agenda</b>		
s.	Agenda drafted early by SPC FAME based on past HoF and RFMM outcomes and emerging regional issues and share with members for feedback	
t.	Small agenda drafting committee to draft agenda early and share with members for feedback, to increase member input and guidance	HoF15 will have to agree on any agenda drafting committee

## Recommendations

27. This working paper discusses lessons and opportunities from the past three SPC Heads of Fisheries Meetings, organised during COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by these discussions and based on their experience from participating in the past three meetings, members are invited to:
- a. **discuss** and **note** the lessons learnt and opportunities of hosting annual SPC HoF meetings as agreed to at HoF11,
  - b. **discuss** and **consider** options proposed in this paper on the future arrangements of HoF meetings, including reaffirming its role and priorities, considering its frequency and timing, duration and approach, and options for development of the meeting’s agenda,
  - c. **note** that hosting SPC HoF and RTMCFA/CBFD annually requires substantial resourcing in staff time and meeting costs, and
  - d. **note** the SPC preference to change meeting timing to ensure adequate preparations are made should members decide to continue annual face-to-face meetings.