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WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION (WECAFC)

ELEVENTH (VIRTUAL) SESSION OF THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY GROUP (SAG)

19-20 June 2023

Intersessional activities by WECAFC Secretariat: Coordination of the activities of the Advisory Groups, the IWG/Strategic reorientation process, the Executive Committee and other major actions to support the achievement of the goals and objectives of the Commission

This document gives an overview of the intersessional activities of the Secretariat of WECAFC, as outlined in the Focus area 4. Fostering a conducive environment within the WECAFC Secretariat to support the achievement of the goals and objective of the Commission of the endorsed 2022-2027 Strategic Plan of the Commission (<https://www.fao.org/3/cc2978en/cc2978en.pdf>).

With the 18th Session of the Commission held last year, and another within less than two years, there have been relatively limited activities of the advisory bodies (the working groups and the Scientific Advisory Group) compared to the regular intersessional period. It is worth noting that the decision to have the 19th session was made by the Commission to align the meeting cycles and provision of recommendations with the Regional Conference for the Latin America and the Caribbean. As the key statutory body assigned to implement the decisions of the Commission between its sessions the Executive Committee maintained the trends started in the previous intersession, in convening periodic meetings to carry out such tasks as entrusted to it by the Commission. Subsequently, the coordination of intersessional meetings of the working groups and other subsidiary bodies such as the ad hoc intersessional working group (IWG) under the direct oversight of the Chair of the Commission, was less, while matters requiring the actions by the Executive Committee, the follow up on processes not fully completed during the 18th Session, such as the revised rules of procedure, the partnership framework with the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the strategic reorientation, publications, and coordination of resource mobilization between working groups required the largest share of the time assigned by the Secretariat to WECAFC.

The current document, which fits within the above context, aims to present the key achievements spread across the four main headings of the 2022-2027 strategic plan:

- Area 1: Improve regional fisheries governance;
- Area 2: Increase regional information exchange and collaboration in fisheries management;
- Area 3: Strengthen regional fisheries management and best-practice approaches for fisheries and aquaculture; and
- Area 4: Fostering a conducive environment within the WECAFC Secretariat to support the achievement of the goals and objective of the Commission.

The coordinated activities are distributed across six main categories:

1. Executive Committee of the Commission

Up until June, this body was composed of the Chair of the Commission (Mr Edward Abella Jackson) from , Central American Fisheries and Aquaculture Organisation (OSPESCA), the First Vice-Chair, from Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) membership (Mr Gavin Bellamy), and the Chair of SAG (Ms Nancie Cummings). From 27 September 2022 to 8 June 2023, this body held more than five meetings, a frequency once again higher than indicated in the 2014 revised rules of procedure that the Executive Committee shall meet at least once a year.

This body led the post-WECAFC18 review process of the revised 2014 Rules of Procedure which was endorsed pending technical and legal review. Two rounds of review, including the FAO Legal Division and WECAFC members, still leave some points to be addressed for a readily available for full clearance and endorsement. The last version will be discussed at the 19th plenary, which may be attended in-person by a FAO expert of the Legal Division, to ease the plenary final process.

The identification of the second Vice-Chair initiated in October 2022 by WECAFC Secretariat did not raise any response for volunteers. The Secretariat then approached the US Focal Point, Ms C. Gruber, as a WECAFC member neither of CRFM nor OSPESCA, to kindly assist in leading the process between those members. Extensive consultations in this group took place until March 2023, before two names were put forward. The last outcome was announced on 31st May, after the withdrawal of the previously selected former Brazilian focal point who could have brought a gender balance within the Executive Committee. Mr. Ronny Leiva Martinez, *Viceministro de Producción Primaria, Pesquera y Acuícola*, also WECAFC Focal point for Venezuela, is now the second Vice-Chair.

The preparation of the 19th Session of WECAFC was also initiated, with the initial aim of Jamaica hosting it, as First Vice-Chair of the Commission. This unfortunately had to be changed to Barbados, the host country of the Secretariat of WCAFC, after the April meeting of the Executive Committee. The draft agenda from the Committee shared with WECAFC members on two occasions for inputs, was finalized and the invitations together with the annotated agenda and other supporting documentation were sent on 7 and 8 June to members and partners for nominations of delegates within a month period.

As a general observation of the limited involvement and support of many members to the agreed work of the Commission, illustrated by the low or lack of response to the calls for volunteers to strengthen various processes through the established bodies (SAG, Executive Committee, Drafting Group under the IWG), the Secretariat proposed to the Executive Committee that the Chair initiates contacts, first with ministers in charge of fisheries in OSPESCA countries. This would then extend to CRFM members, then the membership neither of CRFM nor OSPESCA, to sensitize them on this critical matter to the effective implementation of the intersessional programme of work and timely delivery of expected products.

2. Scientific Advisory Group

Despite the unsuccessful call to WECAFC members from 27 October until 7 December 2022 for two additional members to strengthen this essential body of the Commission, it continued its work under the leadership of its Chair, Ms Nancie Cummings, meeting to discuss how best to support the working groups intersessionally, and responding to requests from the Executive Committee on specific matters, such as the trends in the production of spiny lobster, the US proposed listing of Queen Conch (QC) on the Endangered Species Act (ESA). These internal meetings rarely involved a logistical arrangement by the Secretariat.

The report of the eleventh session is in the Publication Workflow System (PWS) and expected to be published before summer. This twelfth session is fully supported from the ring-fenced fund of WECAFC.

3. Activities of the WECAFC working groups

Three of the 11 working groups of the Commission met in a hybrid format. These are the Spawning Aggregations (SA) WG, which held its fifth meeting 14-15 March 2023, the QC WG completed its sixth meeting on 17th March, and the Fisheries using Anchored/Moored Fish Aggregating Devices Working Group (aFAD WG) from 17 to 19 April 2023. The first two WGs held in a hybrid format in San Juan, Puerto Rico benefitted from the overall preparation of WECAFC Secretariat and a Task Force, and the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC) with technical and financial support from the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The activities of the aFAD WG are supported since 2021 by the European Union-funded project "*Support to the Secretariat of WECAFC in implementing targeted actions of the 2019-2020 Workplan on improved regional fisheries governance*", including its fifth meeting held in Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica, also as a hybrid event.

The Fisheries Data and Statistics WG (FDS-WG) did not meet during the intersession however work was carried by the WG convener collaboratively with the WECAFC-FIRMS taskforce on several topics of the WG workplan including the following:

- Prepared v1.0 of the Data Collection Framework as an FAO Circular
- Revising Group 1 of the WECAFC List of Aquatic Species to include Mutton Snapper and Nassau Grouper as priority species in accordance with the guidelines for elevation of species as agreed at the Conclusion session of the FDS-WG2, in response to the endorsement of the Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan by WECAFC 18
- Progressing intersession discussions of WECAFC proposals for statistical reporting
 - Held intersession discussion between USA/Bahamas
 - Planning intersession discussion for July with Venezuela/EU(France) on statistical reporting areas
- Advanced the work on WECAFC-FIRMS inventories of fisheries and stocks and initial steps towards operationalization of the Regional Database (RDB) now named WECAFIS
 - Support initial training (June) on WECAFIS statistical platform to WECAFC Members in completion of DCRF task inputs towards implementation of the DCRF

The sustainability of WECAFIS is a critical matter deserving attention, particularly securing the needed resources for a regional database manager.

- FDS-WG Convener collaboratively with IUU and Spiny lobster WG conveners developed a concept note for proposal titled “*Enhance data collection and monitoring and develop practical approach to characterize illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) for sustainable small-scale spiny lobster fisheries in the WECAFC region*”.
- FDS-WG convener collaboratively with WECAFC-FIRMS taskforce provided input to aFAD, SAWG, and Conch WG meetings as relates to alignment of data collection initiatives being prepared for those WGs with the DCRF.
- FDS-WG convener provided input to Secretariat and FAO NFIS staff on the WECAFC WECFIS regional database in support that the platform is ready for data calls, and noting the additional capacity needs to support the diverse and increasing workload of the various WGs.

An urgent and pivotal matter to the survival of the WGs is the convening responsibility, which is not enforced across all the 11 WGs. Indeed, despite the calls for volunteers to strengthen the scientific support, as of today, only seven WGs have a convener, with the anchored/moored FAD (aFAD) position filled at the 5th Working Group meeting thanks to the agreement of Barbados. This is too few as persons who dedicate their time to the ever-increasing intersessional work. As reported to WECAFC18, except the FDS-WG, all the conveners are provided by CRFM members, a concern which needs due attention by the Commission. The Secretariat is proposing that the Commission discusses the possibility of distributing the convener responsibility by group of member countries (CRFM, OSPESCA, Other members). For ease of reference, this is the current situation of the WGs with conveners:

- OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CFMC Working Group on Caribbean Spiny Lobster. The convener from Panama, a OSPESCA country, has announced her intention not to continue, but is kindly collaborating in the preparation of a project proposal.
- CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch, convened by CRFM Secretariat.
- WECAFC Working Group on Fisheries Using anchored/moored FADS, convened by Barbados.
- CRFM/WECAFC Working Group on Flyingfish/Dolphinfish in the Eastern Caribbean. The QCWG convener (CRFM) is also the convener of this WG.
- CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM Working Group on Spawning aggregations, convened by Belize.
- Regional Working Group on Illegal Unreported and Unregulated fishing (RWG-IUU), convened by CRFM Secretariat
- WECAFC/CRFM/OSPESCA Fisheries Data and Statistics Working Group (FDS-WG), convened by the USA.

Detailed intersessional reports, including the amendments to recommendations and workplan, in addition to revised regional instruments and tools, will be separately prepared by each of the relevant WGs for presentation to the 12th session. The draft proceedings of the three meetings held in 2023 are being processed with an objective to officially have them all published before WECAFC19.

4. Other subsidiary bodies activities

The main intersessional activity undertaken was under the oversight of the Ad hoc Intersessional Working Group (IWG) established by WECAFC17, which is tasked with implementing the Roadmap for progressing towards the development of a model for a regional fisheries management entity or arrangement in the WECAFC area.

The IWG made of all WECAFC members is spearheaded by the Chair of WECAFC and two Vice Chairs representing the CRFM and the OSPESCA. With the institutional changes within these partner RFBs and some members, with a subsequent turnover, it was critical to reactivate the membership of the Drafting group (DG) under the IWG established following the 23 October 2020 seminar. This DG initially made up of Brazil, European Union (member organization), Grenada, Mexico and the Netherlands was tasked with developing specific text options related to the mandate and objectives of the “transformed” WECAFC (WECAFC as a

regional fishery management entity/RFME or arrangement/RFMA). Seven was the agreed membership, besides the oversight by the Chair of the IWG and support of the two co-chairs. However, a call to strengthen it was also unsuccessful, and, as this document is produced, it has three members, after the withdrawal of Grenada during the previous intersession, and recently (May 2023) the unavailability of the Netherlands. Following its first meeting post-WECAFC18 held on 29 December 2022 two additional meetings were held, and the Chair has taken the lead during the intersession in drafting the proposed draft text options. The version to be translated and shared with the Commission members, is expected to be available before the end of June. A clear timeline is yet to be finalized, whether there would be a virtual meeting prior or only during WECAFC19 to discuss the drafted document.

5. Resource mobilization, Projects development and implementation

In terms of new projects since the last Commission's meeting, supported by some WG conveners and leads of thematic task forces, the Secretariat coordinated the finalization and approval by the EU DG Mare of a project to be jointly implemented by the SAWG and the Fisheries data and statistics FDS-WG. The *"Improving ecosystem approach to fisheries by advancing fish spawning aggregation information gathering and increase of public engagement in the WECAFC region"* is a 14-month project with a budget of USD 240 000, which showcases the concept of streamlining the implementation of management measures and other tools endorsed by the Commission through an increased collaborative work among the WGs. Another proposal is under preparation between the FDS, the Spiny lobster and IUU WGs. This proposed concept note pending the review before the development of a full-fledged proposal and endorsement by EU is titled: *"Enhance data collection and monitoring and develop practical approach to characterize illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) for sustainable small-scale spiny lobster fisheries in the WECAFC region"*.

Besides the project *Support to implementation of the Regional Plan of Action to deter and eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in the Western Central Atlantic* a USD 158,025 project which supports the Strategic reorientation of WECAFC and will terminate on 30th June, currently operational projects under the coordination of WECAFC Secretariat, all funded by the EU DG Mare are:

- GCP/SLC/217/EC- *"Support to the Secretariat of WECAFC in implementing targeted actions of the 2019-2020 Workplan on improved regional fisheries governance"*: This USD 278,550 project supports two activities within the approved 2019-2020 Programme of Work of WECAFC (Activity 3.9) incorporates "Increased knowledge of and experience with offshore FADs (Fish Aggregating Devices) in the WECAFC region" and "Evidence of the implementation of the Roadmap towards the preparation of the Second Preparatory". It therefore benefits the aFAD WG and the Commission's strategic reorientation process by establishing the relevant information and scientific knowledge base.
- GCP/SLC/219/EC- *"WECAFC - Strengthening the Scientific basis (FAO)- Support to the secretariat of WECAFC for an effective implementation of priority actions of the Programme of Work agreed at the 17th Session of the Commission"*. The overall objective is to strengthen the WECAFC Secretariat's coordinating role of connected undertakings on fisheries governance, with the majority of the USD 185,361.45 grant targeting the Regional Steering Committee for the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) 2022 and the second component in support of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch to advance data collection efforts for sustainable queen conch fisheries and conservation management. A detail report as a background document on the multiscale and multipartners activities achieved within the celebratory year will be prepared for the closing ceremony of WECAFC IYAFA 2022, to be held during WECAFC19.
- GCP/SLC/223/EC- *"Improving ecosystem approach to fisheries by advancing fish spawning aggregation information gathering and increase of public engagement in the WECAFC region"*, with an initial end date of 28 February 2024, but this USD 214,450 project will require an extension of at least six months given the late inception.

There are regional projects to which some WECAFC WGs are contemplated to contribute implementation, as well as participation by the Secretariat, in particular the approved GEF-funded projects which are just starting their staffing and inception meetings:

- The “*BE-CLME+*”: *Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities Through Marine Spatial Planning in the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem Plus*, a USD 6.5 million project which covers six countries (Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama, and Saint Lucia). It will promote blue economy development in the CLME+ through marine spatial planning (MSP) and marine protected areas (MPAs), ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF), and sustainable fisheries value chains, in seeking to address the marine environmental threats to realizing national climate-resilient blue economies in the Caribbean, which are hampered by several key barriers and management and policy gaps, such as limited implementation of the ecosystems approach to fisheries management and insufficient integration of climate-resilient blue economic development; inadequate knowledge and enabling frameworks for Caribbean fisheries value chains, and inadequate capacity at both the regional and national levels to institutionalize sustainable fisheries within blue economy approaches that promote sustainable development benefits.
- *Enhancing capacity for the adoption and implementation of EAF in the shrimp and groundfish fisheries of the North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem (EAF4SG)*, which seeks to advance adoption and implementation of the ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF) in the shrimp and groundfish fisheries in the North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem, supporting country implementation of the CLME+ SAP. The 48-month project of USD 1,776,484 project is a follow-up to the *Catalysing Implementation of the Strategic Action Programme for the Sustainable Management of shared Living Marine Resources in the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems*, and will benefit Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.
- *Strategies, technologies and social solutions to manage bycatch in tropical Large Marine Ecosystem Fisheries (REBYC-III CLME+)*, a USD 6.5 million project to benefit Barbados, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago. It seeks to manage bycatch and reduce discards in the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems (CLME+), thereby promoting sustainable and responsible fisheries that provide economic opportunities, while ensuring the conservation of marine living resources, supporting country implementation of the CLME+ SAP, and with successful solutions for potential scale up to other LMEs.
- a. The *Protecting and Restoring the Ocean’s natural Capital, building Resilience and supporting region-wide Investments for sustainable Blue socio-economic development (PROCARIBE+)*¹, a 5-year project of USD 15,429,817, starting this year, that aims at protecting, restoring and harnessing the natural coastal and marine capital of the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems (CLME+) to catalyze investments in a climate-resilient, sustainable post-covid Blue Economy, through strengthened regional coordination and collaboration, and wide-ranging partnerships. The project seeks to achieve this by enabling and developing sustainable and resilient ocean-based (blue) economies (through Marine Spatial Planning, marine conservation, sustainable fisheries and addressing land-based sources of pollution); while taking into account cross-cutting issues such as climate change, gender and post COVID-19 recovery. The project will build on the results from the UNDP/GEF CLME (2009-2014) and CLME+ (2015-2021) Projects, and catalyze the next iteration of key regional processes, such as the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) / Strategic Action Programme (SAP). The project will operationalize a region-wide ocean coordination mechanism that seeks to enhance collaboration and coordination for the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources in the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems.

¹ Acronym derived from the project title: Protecting and Restoring the Ocean’s natural Capital, building Resilience and supporting region-wide Investments in sustainable Blue socio-economic development. Beneficiary countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, the Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela

6. Partnership, data and information sharing for improved regional governance in fisheries

a. Partnership with RFMOs and other arrangements in the region

This refers mainly to fostering collaboration and regional cooperation with ICCAT, NAFO, COPPESAALC, Sargasso Sea Commission, through mutual participation to thematic, technical and annual meetings. Under this specific point, falls the efforts made in initiating the implementation of the Commission's recommendation regarding the collaboration with ICCAT. The Commission indeed requested the development of a MoU between the two organizations on matters of common interest. In line with the Recommendation in paragraph 118 of the proceedings of the 17th Session, the Secretariat liaised with the ICCAT Secretariat to develop a draft MoU. The Secretary of WECAFC participated in the 26th annual meeting of ICCAT in 2019 to follow up on the matter. The review was done by the FAO Division of Legal and Constitutional Matters (LEGA), but subsequent feedback from ICCAT was not cleared to enable the WECAFC Secretariat to share with members the version which meets the requirements of LEGA. There has been no advancement until after WECAFC18 when the feedback from ICCAT was reviewed by LEGA, with suggested changes, including the transformation of the MoU into a Letter of Intent (LOI). In June 2023 the Secretariat received comments from ICCAT on this proposed LOI, which was then discussed within the Executive Committee and subsequently shared with LEGA and members. Finalizing this collaborative framework is a specific agenda of the WECAFC19. It is worth to recall that there is already a longstanding agreement in place between ICCAT and FAO that could provide all the necessary legal basis for cooperation with WECAFC, as an Article VI body.

b. data and information sharing/Publications

There are currently in the pipeline of the FAO PWS the following publications to be published from now on until end of September 2023:

- Data Collection Reference Framework
- Review of the Biological Data, the Stocks Spatial Distribution and the Ecological Connectivity between the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction and the Exclusive Economic Zones in the WECAFC region
- SAG XI and WECAFC18 reports
- Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan: Focus on Nassau Grouper and Mutton Snapper (FSAMP)
- Regional Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks, Rays and Chimaeras in the WECAFC area
- 5th Spawning aggregations WG meeting report
- 6th Queen Conch WG meeting report
- 5th anchored/moored FAD WG meeting
- SAG XII report

Conclusion

Overall, the length of this intersession (less than a year) did not affect the extent of work undertaken by the various constituencies of WECAFC, as portrayed by this report in terms of implemented intersessional work programme, notwithstanding the limited human and financial resources of the Secretariat, and the relatively little engagement by majority of members, with always the same committed members bearing the brunt of the interventions. It is urgent to address on a sustainable basis the matter of unfilled positions of SAG members, WGs conveners, IWG and DG members. While a commendable support by some members through generous financial contribution and participation to technical task forces is acknowledged, more efforts need to be deployed by all WECAFC members, to share the burden for a fully effective Commission, within a suitably manageable coordination and appropriate workload by a Secretariat, composed of only two staff members,

moreover, tasked with allocating 50% of their time exclusively to the development of the fisheries and aquaculture program of 13 CARICOM countries. Specifically connected with the WGs, it is recommended that the proposed discussion by Commission members of the possibility of distributing the convener responsibility by group of member countries (CRFM, OSPESCA, Other members), be tabled at WECAFC19.