


December 2011

	منظمة الأغذية والزراعة للأمم المتحدة	联合国 粮食及 农业组织	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations	Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'alimentation et l'agriculture	Продовольственная и сельскохозяйственная организация Объединенных Наций	Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura
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COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

SUB-COMMITTEE ON AQUACULTURE

Sixth Session

Cape Town, South Africa, 26-30 March 2012

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FAO TECHNICAL GUIDELINES ON AQUACULTURE CERTIFICATION

Executive Summary

The 29th session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI), held in Rome from 31 January to 4 February 2011, approved the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification. This paper presents ideas and suggestions for implementing the Guidelines based on FAO experiences and recommendations made by COFI.

The Sub-Committee is invited to:

advise the secretariat on providing assistance in the implementation of the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification, taking into consideration the proposed activities in paragraph 21 and any others which the Sub-Committee deem necessary.

1. The 29th session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI), held in Rome from 31 January to 4 February 2011, recognized the growing importance of aquaculture for food and nutrition security, poverty alleviation, employment creation and its overall social and economic benefits to people worldwide. The Committee emphasized the need for better management of the sector to ensure its sustainable growth.
2. The Committee approved the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification and noted that the implementation of the Guidelines should be gradual.
3. The Committee recognized the existing standards and guidelines set by international organizations such as the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) for aquatic animal health and welfare, the CODEX Alimentarius Commission for Food Safety and the International Labour Organization (ILO) for socio-economic aspects. However, in the absence of a precise international reference framework for the implementation of some specific minimum criteria contained in the Guidelines, the Committee recognized the importance of developing the appropriate standards in order to ensure that the certification systems do not become unnecessary barriers to trade. The Committee noted the necessity for the certification systems to remain consistent with international standards and to comply with the provisions contained in the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and

Phytosanitary Measures and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

4. The Committee noted the need for the provision of assistance for capacity development in implementing the Guidelines in developing countries.
5. The Committee also recommended that FAO develop an evaluation framework to assess the conformity of public and private certification schemes with the FAO aquaculture certification guidelines.
6. The Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification are provided as information document COFI:AQ/VI/2012/Inf. 7.
7. These Guidelines provide guidance for the development, organization and implementation of credible aquaculture certification schemes. Minimum substantive criteria for developing aquaculture certification standards are provided in the Guidelines: (a) animal health and welfare; (b) food safety; (c) environmental integrity; and (d) socio-economic aspects. The extent to which a certification scheme seeks to address the issues depends on the objectives of the scheme, which should be explicitly and transparently stated by the scheme.
8. For voluntary certification schemes, these Guidelines are to be interpreted and applied in their entirety in a manner consistent with national laws and regulations and, where they exist, international agreements.
9. The Guidelines recognised the fact that responsible development of aquaculture depends on three factors, social, economic and environmental sustainability, all of which must be addressed. It also recognises that there is an extensive national and international legal framework in place for various aspects of aquaculture and its value chain, covering issues such as aquatic animal disease control, food safety and conservation of biodiversity.
10. Legislation is particularly strong for processing and the export and import of aquatic products. Recognized competent authorities are normally empowered to verify compliance with mandatory national and international legislation. Other issues such as environmental sustainability and socio-economic aspects may not be covered in such a binding manner and open the opportunity for voluntary certification as a means to demonstrate that a particular aquaculture system is managed responsibly.
11. Credible aquaculture certification schemes consist of three main components: (i) standards; (ii) accreditation; and (iii) certification. The guidelines therefore cover: (a) standard setting processes required to develop and review certification standards; (b) accreditation systems needed to provide formal recognition to a qualified body to carry out certification; and (c) certification bodies required to verify compliance with certification standards.
12. The Guidelines state that developing and implementing a certification scheme may be undertaken by any entity qualified to do so in accordance with the requirements of these Guidelines. Such an entity can include, inter alia, a government, an intergovernmental organization, a non-governmental organization, private sector group (e.g. a producer or trade association), a civil society arrangements, or consortium comprising some or all of these different stakeholder groups, as direct users of the guidelines. The guidelines provide information on the institutional and organizational arrangements for aquaculture certification, including governance requirements, particularly to ensure that conflicts of interest are avoided.
13. The Guidelines recommend that the development of certification schemes should consider the importance of being able to measure the performance of aquaculture systems and practices, and the ability to assess conformity with certification standards.
14. The Guidelines call for entities responsible for new and existing aquaculture certification schemes to assess, verify and document that these certification schemes have been developed and are being implemented in accordance with the Guidelines. If there are deficiencies in the way an existing scheme was developed and/or in how it is being implemented, the entities responsible for the functions

(i.e. standard setting, accreditation or certification) should act accordingly to define and implement a corrective action plan. When this is completed, the entities should verify and document that the scheme is in accordance with the Guidelines. There should not be any conflict of interest among the entities involved.

15. If the entities responsible for a private aquaculture certification scheme do not provide credible assurance that the scheme has been developed and is being implemented in accordance with the guidelines, stakeholder groups (especially those being certified under the scheme) may use these Guidelines to have the scheme evaluated by a body with the appropriate expertise or undertake such evaluation themselves.

16. The evaluation would use these Guidelines to assess whether a certification scheme is developed and implemented in accordance with the guidelines regarding, inter alia:

- whether the principles have been adhered to;
- whether the special considerations have been addressed;
- whether the objectives of the scheme and issue areas have been addressed in accordance with the appropriate minimum substantive requirements; and
- whether the standard setting, accreditation and/or certification have been developed and implemented in accordance with the institutional and procedural requirements.

17. As clearly expressed in the Guidelines as well as the recommendation by COFI, there is the need to develop an evaluation framework to assess the conformity of public and private certification schemes with the FAO aquaculture certification guidelines.

18. A similar situation was experienced with the FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. Following discussions, both at COFI and the COFI Sub-Committee on Fish Trade, relating to checking claims of compliance of ecolabelling schemes with the FAO Guidelines on ecolabelling of fish and fishery products, the Twenty-eighth Session of COFI requested the Secretariat to present a proposal to address this issue to the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade. The Secretariat prepared and presented a document outlining various options for assessing the conformity of ecolabelling schemes with the FAO Guidelines to the Twelfth Session of the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade.

19. As recommended by the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade, in November 2010, FAO held an Expert Consultation to Develop an FAO Evaluation Framework to Assess the Conformity of Public and Private Ecolabelling Schemes with the FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. The report is provided as information document COFI:AQ/VI/2012/Inf. 8.

20. There are many aquaculture certification schemes and certifiers that exist. They certify for various criteria and some include one or more minimum criteria recommended in the Guidelines. It appears that many large retailers are committed to source aquaculture products certified as sustainably produced. Many retailers look for certified special niche products such as organic fish while some look for social responsibility of the production systems and practices.

21. In order to move forward with the implementation of the Sub-Committee's recommendations on Guidelines and extending assistance to FAO Members towards capacity building, the following are proposed:

- Development of appropriate standards on socio-economic aspects and environmental integrity for certifying aquaculture;
- Development of an assessment framework to evaluate conformity of aquaculture certification schemes with the FAO Guidelines;
- Review of selected aquaculture certification schemes to better understand their conformity with the FAO Guidelines;
- Development of tools for capacity building to assist stakeholders in the implementation of aquaculture certification.

ACTION REQUESTED FROM SUB-COMMITTEE

22. The Sub-Committee is requested to advise the secretariat on providing assistance in the implementation of the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification, taking into consideration the above proposed activities in paragraph 21 and any others which the Sub-Committee deem necessary.