



WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION (WECAFC)

Amendment to Recommendation WECAFC/XVIII/2022/4 (– Updated 15 March 2023 at the Fifth Meeting) of the WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations (SAWG)

Cover Note

The SAWG has held two meetings since the adoption of the Recommendation WECAFC/17/2019/14 “*On the Sustainable Management of Spawning Aggregations and Aggregating Species*” at the 17th Session of the Commission (WECAFC17) held from 15 to 18 July 2019. This document enshrined 10 recommendations which emerged from commitments made to an associated 2018–2020 work plan at the second meeting of the SAWG in March 2018. These recommendations were subject to review at the third meeting of SAWG in December 2019, during which many of these recommendations were found to have been accomplished through diligent intersessional efforts.

The advancement of the formal adoption process for the *Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Draft Fishery Management Plan* (FSAMP) and completion of the “*Big Fish*” Regional Communications Strategy now demand elevated levels of commitment for their most needed implementation. Annual calls for regional harmonization of closed seasons and strengthened enforcement have been issued, along with short films for stakeholder engagement. Many activities have also been implemented at the member State level, including status assessments, passing of legislation and the creation of protected areas.

It is recognized that at the regional level, many of the data-dependent recommendations have not been achieved, impeded by data scarcity and resource limitations for implementation of associated high-level tasks. Fundraising efforts are ongoing to support the development of projects to determine the status of all known FSA sites, and to produce a set of standard monitoring protocols and sustain an associated regional monitoring database.

Another gap is the lack of national implementation of a seasonal closure for Nassau grouper and mutton snapper as called for in FSAMP. Recognizing the need for this measure, the Chair of the WECAFC Executive Committee sent a letter to the WECAFC membership in August 2020 strongly encouraging Members to establish synchronized regional closed seasons for Nassau grouper and mutton snapper to safeguard their spawning aggregations, and promote their effective conservation, management, and development.

The transition from the 2018–2020 workplan to the 2021–2025 workplan reaffirms the commitment of the SAWG to procure funding to pursue its data dependent objectives, and to establish a framework to facilitate regional monitoring of FSA management trends by WECAFC. The Fifth meeting of the SAWG had to be re-scheduled given Covid-19 travel restrictions, and as such, opportunities to achieve concrete results toward conservation and recovery of the FSAs continue to be postponed. The need for strong education and communication should be highlighted.

In the meantime, existing recommendations have been modified to reflect the status of deliverables. These recommendations call for adoption and implementation of the FSAMP, and actions to advance

improved data collection, assessment, communication, and outreach for the conservation of FSAs. They also promote capacity building and the mobilization of resources to assist WECAFC members conduct priority research, monitoring, management, and enforcement activities.

The ramifications of not adopting these recommendations include the perpetuation of gaps in knowledge and critical information necessary to guide decision makers, inadequate protection and management of FSAs, and overexploitation of FSAs that [further] threatens their sustainability.

Preamble

The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC):

- RECALLING that the objective of the Commission is to promote the effective conservation, management and development of the living marine resources within the area of competence of the Commission, in accordance with the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication and to address common problems of fisheries management and development faced by members of the Commission;
- REAFFIRMING its commitment to support management and implementation of regional strategies and regulations to protect spawning aggregations and aggregating species through the establishment of the WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations (SAWG) at the 14th session of WECAFC in 2012;
- NOTING that stocks of many species of groupers and snappers in the Caribbean have declined significantly in the last three decades, some of their fish spawning aggregations (FSAs) have declined or disappeared and that immediate action is required to stop further reductions;
- MINDFUL that many fishers' livelihoods are dependent on harvest from spawning aggregations and the fisheries that they support, but also that these fishers have experience and expertise that could be invaluable in the conservation, management, and possible tourism at such sites and that the development of economic alternatives for affected fishers should accompany efforts to halt fishing during spawning periods or close areas where spawning occurs;
- REAFFIRMING the recommendations of the Declaration of Miami (2013) issued at the 1st WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations;
- REAFFIRMING and supporting the recommendations and the workplan from the 2nd meeting of the WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations;
- NOTING members' commitment to the 2018 SAWG workplan, various planned actions and that activities are well underway; and
- COMMITTED to individually and collectively taking measures and actions to further improve the management and conservation of fish spawning aggregations and species that aggregate to spawn in the wider Caribbean region.

Action Items

The WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations, at its Third and Fourth Meetings on 18–19 December 2019 and 9–10 November 2020, ADOPTS in conformity with the provision of Article 6 (h) of the Revised Statutes of the WECAFC the RECOMMENDATION that:

1. WECAFC, CFMC, and as appropriate CRFM, OSPESCA, and CEP-SPAW support the national adoption and strategic implementation of a **Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fisheries Management Plan by all Members**.
2. WECAFC Secretariat and Members invest resources and support the **standardization of existing monitoring programs**, or introduction where these do not exist, to coalesce them into a unified regional monitoring program utilizing standard protocols to share data designed to track the status and trends of aggregations and the species that form them and thus contribute to local, national, and regional management efforts.
3. Members of WECAFC call for **standardized and appropriate measures to protect Fish Spawning Aggregations (FSAs)** at the national, regional, and international scale, including strengthening enforcement of closed seasons, closed areas, sales bans during the closed season, and international collaboration and communication around law enforcement.
4. Members of WECAFC agree upon and adopt, as a precautionary measure, **a regional seasonal closure for all commercial and recreational fishing of Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)**, at least for the period 1 December–31 March and that Members will not permit export or commercial sale of Nassau grouper or its products (e.g. roe, fillets) for the duration of the seasonal closure.
5. Members of WECAFC **determine the status and timing of spawning seasons** known Fish Spawning Aggregation (FSA) sites with emphasis on FSAs of mutton snapper and Nassau grouper.
6. WECAFC Secretariat supports an **assessment of the direct and indirect economic value of FSA fisheries and FSA-associated species** and the **socio-economic impact of proposed management measures** to inform future management decision-making.
7. **Members are encouraged to offer training and/or resources to fishers** (displaced due to FSA closures) **in monitoring, research, assessment, best practice for fish release (e.g. descending devices) and suitable economic alternatives**. Fishers and other stakeholders to be involved in cooperative research and FSA management.
8. The WECAFC Secretariat and Members support and promote a **regional outreach and communication strategy** on conservation and management of FSAs.
9. Members of WECAFC prioritize **FSAs, Nassau grouper, mutton snapper and other aggregating species for monitoring, conservation, and management based on status, vulnerability, interval since last assessment and Members' institutional capacity**. Members should provide information to the SAWG and WECAFC Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) to facilitate prioritization of FSAs for allocation of regional support.
10. The WECAFC Secretariat, together with the Members of WECAFC, seek to **mobilize resources to assist the Members in the implementation** of priority research, monitoring, enforcement, management and conservation of FSAs and the species that form them, with particular focus on mutton snapper and Nassau Grouper.
11. Recommends the establishment of a **Fish Aggregation Management Plan Coordination Committee** within the SAWG as recommended in the FSA regional management plan that could be comprised by no more than 10 members with broad regional representation (one from

the six WECAFC marine ecoregions, one from Cartagena Convention/SPAW-RAC, one from English speaking fisher organization, one from Spanish-speaking fisher organization, and a general coordinator). This is considered a priority to support mainstreaming of the implementation of the Regional FSA Management Plan.

12. **The SAWG recommends that Nassau grouper and mutton snapper be elevated to WECAFC Group 1 species for the implementation of the FSAMP.**