



COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

SUB-COMMITTEE ON AQUACULTURE

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PROGRESS REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TECHNICAL GUIDELINES ON AQUACULTURE CERTIFICATION AND THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS CONFORMITY OF AQUACULTURE CERTIFICATION SCHEMES WITH THE GUIDELINES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides a brief report on the status and progress made on implementing the FAO technical guidelines on aquaculture certification and the FAO evaluation framework for assessing conformity of public and private certification schemes with FAO technical guidelines on aquaculture certification. FAO is currently working with the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) in building awareness on the subject among FAO members. FAO also supports and assists GSSI in developing a Benchmarking Tool for assessing conformity of certification schemes with FAO Ecolabelling and Certification Guidelines, which uses the evaluation framework as the reference background document.

The Sub-Committee is invited to: review and comment on the document provide guidance on enhanced collaboration and partnership with GSSI and effective implementation of the FAO Guidelines and the use of conformity assessment framework.

INTRODUCTION

1. Driven by concerns that some forms of aquaculture and fisheries are environmentally unsustainable, socially inequitable and that products are not safe for consumers, there have been attempts, over the years, to respond to the consequent public perceptions and market requirements. In this regard, food safety standards were elevated and international trade regulations tightened. Policy

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and regulations governing environmental sustainability were put in place in many countries, requiring aquaculture producers and fisheries to comply with more stringent environmental mitigation and protection measures. In order to respond to these environmental and consumer concerns and to secure better market access, there is increasing interest in the certification of seafood.

2. Seafood certification schemes are being developed and implemented at international and country levels. The certification of aquaculture facilities, inputs and marketing, wild capture fisheries and processors is being introduced, either individually or in a coordinated manner, to credibly demonstrate that production and harvesting practices are not polluting, disease transmitting, ecologically threatening and/or socially irresponsible. Some countries are attempting to introduce state-mediated certification procedures to certify that aquaculture and wild capture fisheries products are safe to consume and farmed or harvested in accordance with certain environmental and social standards.

FAO GUIDELINES

3. After a transparent and exhaustive consultative process, FAO developed three sets of guidelines for seafood certification:

- FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries¹, originally adopted by the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in 2005, were adopted in revised form by the Twenty-eighth Session of COFI in 2009.
- FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Inland Capture Fisheries², adopted by the 29th session of the COFI in February 2011.
- Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification³, which were approved by the fifth session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries Sub-Committee on Aquaculture (COFI-AQ), held in Phuket, Thailand from 27 September to 1 October 2010 and subsequently endorsed by the 29th session of the COFI in February 2011.

4. Since the adoption of the FAO technical guidelines on aquaculture certification, established third-party aquaculture certification schemes claimed that their schemes are in compliance with FAO guidelines. Several national aquaculture certification schemes which came to effect recently also endorsed FAO guidelines as the basis for developing their schemes.

CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS

5. The aquaculture certification guidelines explicitly state that new and existing aquaculture certification schemes should undertake to assess, verify and document that these certification schemes

¹ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i1119t/i1119t00.htm>

² <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/k8599e/k8599e00.pdf>

³ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/i2296t/i2296t00.htm>

have been developed and are being implemented in accordance with the FAO aquaculture certification 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.

6. If the entities responsible for a 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 appropriate expertise or undertake such evaluation themselves.

7. 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.

8. During the 29th Session of COFI, which endorsed the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification, FAO Members recommended that FAO develop an Evaluation Framework to assess the conformity of public and private certification schemes with the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification. The Thirtieth Session of COFI, held in July 2012, reiterated the need for developing a conformity assessment framework for aquaculture certification guidelines.

9. Responding to these requests made by Members at COFI and COFI-AQ, FAO developed an evaluation framework for assessing the conformity of ecolabeling schemes against FAO Guidelines on ecolabelling of fish and fishery products and an Evaluation Framework to assess the conformity of public and private certification schemes with the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification.

10. The Evaluation Framework for aquaculture certification schemes was developed in accordance with the minimum criteria and requirements set out in the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification. Aquaculture certification scheme that meet the requirements set out in the Evaluation Framework are to be considered as being in compliance with the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification.

11. FAO do not undertake the conformity assessment of certification schemes per se but will provide the tools with which others may undertake the assessment. The actual evaluation process is expected to be used as a self-assessment tool by the certification scheme holder. It is expected also to be used by parties with an interest in assessing the conformity of certification schemes with the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification. These might include governments, consumers,

retailers, processors and harvesters and any other relevant civil society organizations that are seeking to make assessments against the agreed criteria.

12. Following approval by the FAO, the framework was made available for stakeholders to use as necessary to evaluate aquaculture certification schemes against the criteria in the framework.

CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR AQUACULTURE CERTIFICATION SCHEMES

13. The 7th Session of the Sub-Committee, held in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, from 7-11 October, 2013, approved the draft Evaluation Framework with reservations from some countries. The Sub-Committee stated that the draft Evaluation Framework should be a useful and comprehensive tool that includes all aspects necessary to assess compliance with the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification.

14. The Sub-Committee stated that when implementing the Evaluation Framework, international agencies such as World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Organisation on Animal Health (OIE) should be involved within their remits. Some Members expressed the following concerns regarding the Evaluation Framework:

- The implementation of the Evaluation Framework should not create technical barriers to trade, should be gradual in implementation with pilot phases at national and regional levels and should not affect resource limited smallholders;
- Adequate capacity development for implementation of the FAO Guidelines for Aquaculture certification should be ensured through FAO technical assistance mechanisms;
- Open ended questions in the Evaluation Framework should be linked to relevant international standards mentioned in the certification guidelines;
- The Evaluation Framework should be amended and revised as necessary, taking into consideration the knowledge gained during the implementation phase.

15. The concerns expressed during the 7th Session of the Sub-Committee on the framework are being addressed through a consultative process, partly financed by the Directorate General of the Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the European Commission. Several meetings and workshops have been planned in 2015 to build awareness and create a dialogue on the certification guidelines and the conformity assessment framework among the FAO members and the civil society, with the view to address the issues listed above.

CURRENT CONCERNS ON CERTIFICATION

16. As seafood production increases to meet rising global demand, so have concerns of members of the seafood supply chain, consumers and NGOs over the impact that production is having on the environment. One way of providing assurances of more sustainable practices in both aquaculture

production and wild capture fisheries is the use of seafood certification schemes. The increase of seafood certification schemes has led to claim confusion among producers, retailers and consumers over how to recognize a credible certification scheme. This perceived confusion has made decision-making more difficult, and seafood more costly, for everyone.

17. To address such concerns, seafood companies, NGOs, experts, governmental and intergovernmental organizations have created the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) (www.ourGSSI.org), a global platform and partnership working towards sustainable seafood supply. These various stakeholders have come up with a collective, non-competitive approach to provide clarity on seafood certification and ecolabelling, and ensure confidence in certified seafood. GSSI is backed by 32 major private sector companies worldwide from across the seafood industry including from harvesting, aquaculture, farming, processing, food service, retail and brand manufacturing, as funding partners. The GSSI also consists of 5 non-profit affiliated partners which include FAO⁴.

18. GSSI started in 2013 as a strategic alliance between leading actors in the seafood industry and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. It is implemented by GIZ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and co-funded through its develoPPP.de program (<http://www.developpp.de/en>). FAO is a member of the GSSI Steering Board since its inception and also contributes technically to the three GSSI Expert Working Groups on fisheries ecolabelling, aquaculture certification and certification processes and governance.

19. Since its inception, partners have committed time and expertise to come up with a collective approach to provide clarity on fish and seafood certification and ensure consumers and companies can be confident in the certified seafood on offer. GSSI partners have been working to drive forward strategy at high-level Steering Board Meetings, drilled down on priority sector issues through the Expert Working Groups, reached out to seafood sector stakeholders at public updates, brought on board leading experts and collaborated closely with FAO to organize:

- 8 Steering Board Meetings to guide GSSI strategy
- 13 Expert Working Group Meetings on Aquaculture, Fisheries and Process
- 25+ Updates for Stakeholders at Trade Shows, Conferences and Events worldwide
- 3 Expert Consultation Workshops in Australia, Canada and Germany
- A pilot testing program with 3 international and 5 national seafood certification schemes participating.

20. Using the FAO evaluation frameworks to assess the conformity of public and private fisheries ecolabelling and aquaculture certification schemes with the FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine/Inland Capture Fisheries, and the FAO Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification, GSSI has created a Global Benchmark Tool for seafood certification schemes, which is in its final stages of development.

21. GSSI's Global Benchmark Tool includes GSSI Requirements, which seafood certification schemes need to meet to be publicly recognised by GSSI. All GSSI Requirements are grounded in the; (a) the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), (b) the FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling

⁴ <http://www.ourgssi.org/assets/Information-Package/GSSI-Charter-web-16APR15-3.pdf>

of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine/Inland Capture Fisheries, and (c) the FAO Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification. The Tool also includes GSSI Indicators, which are not required for recognition but allow schemes to show their diverse approach and help stakeholders understand where differences exist. These are grounded in the CCRF related FAO documents, ISO normative standards and ISEAL codes. The Tool, including the GSSI Requirements and GSSI Indicators, is expected to work towards a collective objective to minimize the overall environmental impact of how we catch, grow and deliver fish and seafood to meet a growing global demand.

22. Although the GSSI Global Benchmark Tool addresses both, fisheries ecolabelling and aquaculture certification, this document and the discussion at the 8th Session of the Sub-Committee on Aquaculture will restrict to aquaculture certification and conformity assessment.

23. In developing the GSSI's Global Benchmark Tool for aquaculture, the FAO Conformity Assessment Framework and the FAO Aquaculture Guidelines have been used as the background and reference material. During this initial phase, the GSSI tool only addresses the minimum substantive criteria on Environmental Integrity. As a next step GSSI will consider how to address the socio-economic aspects too.

24. At the time of this document went for translation, FAO had plans to hold three regional workshops in Africa (South Africa), Asia (Thailand), and Latin America (Chile) to improve awareness and capacity on aquaculture certification, conformity assessment and benchmarking. These workshops were planned to be held in collaboration with GSSI and hosted by the competent authorities of the three countries. The workshops are part of a project financed by the European Commission (DG-MARE) towards building capacity on aquaculture certification in FAO member countries. The three workshops are expected to involve representatives from 35-40 FAO member countries on the subject.

25. The GSSI Global Benchmark Tool is being currently piloted in several countries and assessed against several aquaculture certification schemes. It is also expected that, during the pilot phase, the GSSI Tool could be used for a gap analysis of schemes providing a pathway for improvement. The results are expected to be public by the end of July 2015. This will contribute to the FAO's consultative process for finalizing the evaluation framework, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2016.

26. As a global public-private partnership and platform, GSSI offers partners from across the seafood industry, NGOs, inter/governmental agencies and experts, the opportunity to work on this leading knowledge-exchange initiative and to collaborate on topics that are shaping the fish and seafood sector's future.

27. This shared solution is expected to make information available across the seafood supply chain to drive change and lower costs. For producers, it means more options to choose the scheme that is right for them and reduce the need for multiple audits to respond to customer requirements. For seafood buyers, it means simpler, more consistent data to guide their purchasing decisions. And for NGOs it means more transparent, verifiable and reliable information to support further efforts to preserve the environment.

