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<b>Feasibility of FIRMS Opening to National Membership (1<sup>st</sup> DRAFT)</b>
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<b>Management Summary</b>

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## Introduction

The FIRMS partnership arrangement was shaped-up with a consensus among FIRMS precursors that the Partnership would open its membership to National level partners once its processes prove mature and performant enough within the initial circle of Regional partners.

Three years after the launch of the FIRMS partnership, and less than one year after the publication of the FIRMS website with its Resources module, the FIRMS chairperson has requested the Secretariat to produce an assessment about the feasibility of opening the Partnership to the national level. This document intends to address this request: a first section recalls how the founding members, aware of the issues associated with such expansion, have designed from a legal view point the arrangement; the feasibility of the expansion is then reviewed from the technical, financial and strategic aspects.

## Legal aspects: Partnership arrangement legal frame

This section recalls how the three instruments of the FIRMS Partnership, namely the Partnership Arrangement, the Rules of Procedures, and the Information Management Policy, cater for welcoming national partners while providing a legal framework designed to cope with issues inherent to such extension: handling of alternative views, risks of lower quality levels, technical and financial ability to manage additional partners, ....

In its preamble, the FIRMS Partnership recognises “*that the partnership may occur at the level of national agencies.*”

Article 5.1 “Eligibility of partners” defines more precisely this intention specifying carefully eligibility criteria.

Article 5.1.1 *National institutions, mandated mandated by a national government, and intergovernemental bodies, that hold responsibilities for the preparation or publication of fisheries relevant to the framework of the partnership may become a Partner.*

Article 5.1.2 *Only one institution per country endorsed by its national government may become a FIRMS partner. That institution may act as focal point to other institutions in a given country, as appropriate.*

Article 5.4.4 adds that the FSC ...

*... will identify potential partners that will contribute to the achievement of the FIRMS objectives, and prioritise their eligibility, with a view to ensure that:*

- 5.4.4.1. their fisheries information reporting complements what FIRMS already covers;*
- 5.4.4.2. their internal information policies are in conformity with quality assurance rules and standards provided for in the FIRMS Information Management Policy referred to in 5.5.4;*
- 5.4.4.3. their mandate is within the FIRMS thematic scope; and*
- 5.4.4.4. the additional workload generated can be absorbed by the FIRMS Secretariat.*

Another important element of the Partnership Arrangement is the concept for the Partners of primary monitoring or management responsibility over resource and fishery units (Article 2.1.2), associated with the obligation to contribute according to its mandate (Article 3.2). This disposition is complemented by Article 3.2.3 which specifies that Partners will identify new partners on the basis that these Partners’ mandate can complement the existing information and not duplicate.

Article 2.1.2 of the partnership affirms that ...

*“information contributions related to fisheries remain within the full control and ownership of the Partner which has primary monitoring or management responsibility over resource and fishery units”*

Article 3.2 *“the Partners will contribute to FIRMS according to their mandate*

*Article 3.2.3 “including in the identification of information that will complement each Partner’s information sources and prevent duplications”*

In the Rules of procedures, Article 8 *Decision making*, anticipating that RFBs might quickly become a minority, precautiously specifies consensus for decisions of the FSC:

*“all decisions of the FSC, including amendments to these Rules of Procedure, will be taken by consensus of all FSC members attending the Session unless this is specified differently in these Rules of Procedures”*

## Technical aspects

Furthering the above mentioned legal framework, the FIRMS Information Management Policy provides a complement on more technical aspects addressing ways to **handle multiple views** on Status and trends of a fishery resource, and **differentiate quality of contributions**.

From the technical perspective, discussing the feasibility of expanding FIRMS to national level implies analysing i) if the FIRMS IMP is settled enough, and ii) how much and reliably the system implements the above mentioned rules and how far it is ready to digest a second wave of newcomers.

### Is the FIRMS Information Management Policy settled enough?

IMP chapter 3 *“Handling of alternative views”* carefully defines data management rules which guarantee both the possibility for alternative views while leaving the ultimate decision for publishing the alternative view to the primary responsible institution as decided by FSC.

*“The presentation of alternate views and interpretations of the information is envisaged in FIRMS. Although a guiding principle is that FIRMS is an information system and not a forum for debate on interpretation of data (such forums are established through bi- or multilateral arrangements or through the regional fisheries bodies), FIRMS provides for mechanisms to identify conflicting information and resolve subsequent issues that may arise among Partners. The Information Management Policy sets the following principles:*

- *one Partner, or joint Partners, are recognized as primary responsible(s) for information on any Marine Resource or Fishery, as per content of Partnership Arrangement’s Annex 2;*
- *the role of the Secretariat is to enforce at system level this primary responsibility;*
- *Partners are entitled to submit alternate views on any Marine Resource or Fishery, final publishing being under the control of Partner(s) having primary responsibility over that Stock or Fishery;*
- *in cases where the primary responsibility is disputed between two or more partners, the FSC may decide on how to publish the alternative views.*

These rules were implemented at system level: any partner is in a position to submit a report on a stock under the ownership of another partner, with the later having the final ability to publish or not. As mentioned however in the report of the FIRMS activities, a number of enhancements and

fixes are still required on the Content management system before full autonomy can be granted to partners in a secure way. At the end of 2007, all these fixes will be implemented.

On the contrary, although the issue of **differentiating the quality of contributions** is addressed by IMP chapter 2 "*Quality assurance*", it probably remains the point most weakly settled:

*“Objectivity will be achieved through submission of the best scientific information, and encouraged through the development of criteria for the establishment of quality levels of partners contributions.”*

Currently, the only measure requested from RFB Partners on the Quality aspect is to provide Quality assurance documentation henceforth published in FIRMS, accessible from any fact sheet so that the user can judge which are the underlying mechanisms to the elaboration of Status and trends. This occurs in a context where Partners have generally similar levels of quality assurance.

However considering a greater diversity of quality of contributions, the current measure while necessary is certainly not sufficient since a passive user will not have immediate hints of the information quality at fact sheet level. **This development of criteria and how to reflect quality levels in the interface remains to be done.** As a background to this necessary exercise, it's useful to remind that ACFR<sup>1</sup> recognised the unequal distribution of scientific knowledge across regions and species groups and the various processes needed to monitor status and trends of resources. The following situations can be encountered:

1. stocks assessed regularly in cooperation:
  - in the framework of management commissions (IATTC, ICCAT, NAFO; CCSBT; FAO Commissions under Article XIV etc.)
  - in the framework of scientific commissions (ICES, PICES, SPC, FAO Commissions under Article VI)
2. stocks assessed regularly at national level
  - in a national fishery management institution or fishery research agency
3. stocks not assessed regularly
  - by university academics (in the framework of thesis, etc). formal assessments published in refereed journals;
  - informal assessments given in other reports (consultants, NGOs, Industry) in newspapers, magazines
  - other types of information of value for assessment (market supply, prices, sector information, etc.)

Recognising such kinds of levels would for example enable the FSC to assess a newcomer to the Partnership and assign its contributions by default to one general quality level. This Partner could then provide evidence for specific contributions which are of distinct quality. Visual representation of quality levels in the fact sheets would also have to be figured out.

#### Other considerations:

- FIRMS administration tools: the settings required at system level for each new partner (inventories, data collection, users and their rights) are currently handled manually directly at database level. The development of an interface enabling to fulfil this task in a more friendly and secure way is a prerequisite before a marked multiplication of Partners.

- Fishcode-STF project website: the fishcode-STF project develops inventories of marine resources and fisheries beyond the FIRMS partners. These inventories concern national levels. Building on FIGIS tools similar to the ones developed for FIRMS, the Fishcode-Project website is going to disseminate the world inventory: a possible scenario is that items of this inventory

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<sup>1</sup> ACFR: FAO Advisory Committee on Fisheries Research

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belonging to FIRMS partners will be presented in the FIRMS website, while the other items would be presented within the Fishcode-STF website. During a maturing period, national candidates to FIRMS could develop their inventories and reporting mechanisms through the Fishcode-STF website.

## **Financial aspects**

No serious extension can be envisaged without a Secretariat strengthened with necessary human resources. The current experience shows that the level of interaction required with the different partners is important: preparing training sessions or meetings, exerting quality control on the inventories, loading in the data base and configuring user rights, discussing and implementing protocols that best fit each partners situation, ends-up being very time consuming. A prerequisite to the extension is to dispose, in addition to the Secretariat staff, of two full time persons having both computing and subject skills.

According to the Partnership arrangement, Partners make the commitment to support all expenses entailed by their participation to FIRMS. This should indeed be the case for national Partners from developed countries, but equity would mean that the participation of developing country Partners should be assisted by external resources, at least during the start-up stages. It is also likely that Partners from developed countries will provide some kind of support (in-kind, or financial) to the Secretariat.

A few costing scenarios are elaborated in Annex 1 of this document. This annex is developed as a Project concept note for seeking support to the expansion of FIRMS.

## **Strategic aspects**

Countries interest: when FIRMS was initially designed, institutions of important countries such as NMFS (USA), DFO (Canada), Abare (Australia), involved in its inception and/or informed of its progress, expressed keen interest to become (one day) member. These countries are pioneers in enforcing systematic reporting, and their federal nature make them very sensitive to the arguments of web-based standards for harmonized reporting. The work on the inventories show that an increasing number of countries prepare and publish on the internet the state of their fishery resources. For example, Ifremer (France), which is developing its information systems so that such reports can be dynamically generated, said it would welcome the publishing of an international standard that it could refer to. It's also worth mentioning that after the mediated FIRMS launch, Mauritius contacted the Secretariat to enquire how to become Partner. In parallel, a country like Indonesia has shown a marked interest in developing under Fishcode-STF its fisheries inventory.

Countries current involvement: countries are not directly involved but inventories of national resources or fisheries were developed through FAO RFBs (CECAF, WECAFC, GFCM, RECOFI). During 2006, members of GFCM and CECAF were informed at their respective Commissions meetings of FIRMS progress. CECAF countries requested follow-up action to evaluate how FIRMS can fulfil their needs. Three CECAF countries (Morocco, Mauritania, Guinea) part of the ISTAM project are adopting on a trial basis the FIRMS schema as part of their information system.

Donors interest: various consultations with the donors show that the trends are towards provision of assistance at regional or national level. Two very concrete examples can here be reported: the EC gave indications that they would support Western african countries in order to improve the quality of basic data collection, and to enable more objective and transparent assessments in a

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regional framework. Another donor, Iceland, would be keen to be able to raise FIRMS as an objective to reach in its cooperation with developing countries. Iceland also understands the needs to support the Secretariat counterpart. Assistance can be relatively easily granted provided the relevant chapter or objective has been identified in the Country's Medium term Development plan recognised by the donor.

The OBIS<sup>2</sup> example: OBIS was launched as part of the Census of Marine Life project supported by the SLOAN foundation. OBIS builds on processes similar to FIRMS but has from the onset chosen to develop its information network with national agencies. OBIS national focal points are fantastic advocates of OBIS and are in a favorable position to explain to their decision makers possible synergies between their institutes's goals and OBIS's ones. They constitute precious channels to get either man-kind (their own time), in kind (local tools set-up for OBIS) or funding support.

The "eggs and hen" story: a fear is certainly that without the minimum required resources at Secretariat level, there is no possibility to open FIRMS at the national level. From the above examples however, it just sounds like FIRMS could enter into a positive development spiral should it deliver the message that national partners can join and be active members of the Partnership. At Secretariat level, the potential activity generated by new national partners would be (and would have to be) compensated by the likely support to be received from either agencies of developed countries or from donors assisting developing ones. This assistance counterpart could indeed be one of the prevailing criteria for selecting national candidates.

Strategically, FIRMS should also strive to extend markedly its geographic coverage at the minimum expense, and building on information of the highest quality level. Such strategy would make countries such as the USA, Australia and Canada eligible.

A transition phase: year 2007 could be seen a transition year during which the Partnership would still not be opened to the national level but the message whereby this would happen soon will be disseminated. This would leave the necessary time for completing the technical framework while showing clear directions to donors. Where possible, practical cooperation and preparation of the data could start with interested countries using the Fishcode-STF website.

Which role for RFB partners: RFB partners would certainly have to play a very proactive role in this extension process. One can foresee:

- advocacy role through meetings with their member states: the FIRMS infrastructure and its related information standards and web protocols should be seen as a tremendous opportunity for RFBs to improve and streamline reporting practices at their level. With the announced expansion of FIRMS, countries should be sensitized with these potential benefits.
- leaders of regional components: RFBs could provide trainers (eg the members of the technical working group could become trainers at regional level); RFBs could be recipient of donors assistance at regional level.

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<sup>2</sup> OBIS: Ocean Biogeographic Information System

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## **Annex 1: Project concept note - Expansion of the Fishery Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS) to cover Fisheries and Fishery resources under national jurisdiction**

### **Background and justifications**

The FIRMS partnership was officially launched in February 2004, directly addressing 5 of 9 actions required by the Strategy-STF framework. Two years later in May 2006, the FIRMS website disseminating the contributions of 10 FIRMS signatory agencies, was launched during the Review Conference of the 1995 UN fish stocks agreement (New York). The FIRMS system hosts information on habitat and biology, exploitation, assessment, management and status and trends of Fishery resources of 13 regional fishery bodies, all together representing about 500 Resource units, a majority of which are located in the Atlantic Ocean.

As it is, the system and Partnership works with FAO and Regional Partners, and more Regional Fishery Bodies will join in the near future. This first phase of development aims at consolidating a trusted platform which will serve to expand at the national level. Through its Regular Programme, FAO provides the Secretariat and ensures basic system maintenance, while developments are enabled thanks to extra-budgetary funds: a french trust fund supporting an Associate Professional Officer, and the Fishcode-STF multilateral trust. Indeed, for a Global monitoring of fishery resources, the goal is to seek as comprehensive coverage as possible, which implies including Resources and Fisheries under National jurisdiction. But such a move in scope requires that more support be made available to FIRMS.

In parallel to FIRMS development, the Fishcode-STF project collates inventories of world resources and fisheries beyond areas covered by FIRMS, concentrating on regions poorly covered by RFBs: FIRMS and Fishcode-STF are two complementary components of the Strategy for improving information on Status and Trends of Capture Fisheries (Strategy-STF), and this complementarity can be advantageously exploited.

To a certain extent, FIRMS is already involved at national level through the Regional Commissions. And besides this, a number of countries have already expressed their interest to join FIRMS. More generally, acknowledging the current move for countries to see more neutrality and transparency through involvement at regional levels, there are obvious benefits for countries to join such collaborative initiative: for countries with lesser capacities, identifying and formalizing list of Fisheries or Resources while starting to provide regularly some monitoring information is the first but indispensable step to sound management, and FIRMS provides a framework to support this move. For countries with higher capacity enabling sophisticated management systems, joining FIRMS and filling in the gaps in the system would enable to demonstrate good Governance to their general public.

### **Objective and scope of the Project**

The proposed project will aim at the expansion of the Fishery Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS) to cover Fishery Management Systems, Fisheries and Fishery resources under national jurisdiction.

During a first phase lasting 4 years, the project will essentially focus at demonstrating feasibility of such expansion by including a limited but representative set of countries, to be selected according to FIRMS partners agreed criteria. While recognizing the primary principle of volunteering, these criteria would strive:

- to meet a variety of situations and make a major breakthrough in FIRMS world coverage;
- to strike balance between developed and developing countries;
- to guarantee a manageable growth taking into account resources available.

The project will provide the opportunity to expand the scope of information to the description of Management systems.

### **Envisaged Strategy**

In elaborating the FIRMS Partnership Arrangement, the FIRMS Steering Committee (FSC) has already set the framework for the desired expansion to the national level. Within this project, the implementation modalities will be discussed by this FSC. Active participation of these RFBs will be sought by touching upon immediate benefits they may anticipate from involving countries, and it is expected that they will constitute sound relays. FSC should in all likeliness decide to invite countries which already expressed interest in joining FIRMS. FSC will also ensure that its mechanisms (in particular its Information Management Policy) are leveraged for welcoming national partners, and will organise the necessary meetings as required. At operational level, the Secretariat will organise regional workshops and training courses for capacity building. Depending on the countries, periods ranging between one to two years are deemed sufficient for bringing a potential partner through the necessary stages before final signature.

System wise, the information sources already gathered by FAO, RFBs and the Fishcode-STF project on inventories of resources and fisheries, and description of management systems, etc. will be major inputs to the system. With the development of the Management System module, facilities will be developed for on-line synoptic views of State and Trends, State of Management Systems, or other similar products. Conditions for long term maintenance of such comprehensive system will also be evaluated.

The overall project will be accompanied by means of a thematic knowledge network including e-forums, and regular meetings of the FIRMS partnership.

Support to FIRMS expansion will be granted in a very flexible way under a specific component of the Fishcode multilateral Trust: agencies from developed countries willing to support the Secretariat as they become partners will do so through financial transfers to the Fishcode-FIRMS trust. Likewise for Donors willing to grant the Secretariat with resources required to interact with developing countries which they support to become Partners. The Fishcode-FIRMS Trust could also be used for direct support of countries.

Likewise, FIRMS RFB partners could be recipient of donors assistance in support to FIRMS expansion.

A minimum critical mass will be necessary to grant the Secretariat with the two Junior staff deemed necessary to provide the expected services accompanying the expansion (development of new features, tailored protocols, training material, training sessions, e-forum moderation and technical assistance, etc...).

Optionally, an International Event seen as a major breakthrough and scene setting for sharing information on Status and Trends of fisheries at Global level could be organised in an attempt to accelerate the process. All together, a pool of 20 agencies representing the Global, Regional and

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National levels should fairly quickly be assembled to provide the key inputs to such an International Event.

### **Preliminary assessment of costs**

Based on the above envisaged strategy, orders of magnitude of costs for the first phase of this project are presented below in Table 1. A few scenarios are highlighted below:

A two years support to 5 countries belonging to the same region would amount to	\$ 133,000
A two years support to the Secretariat to ensure the counterpart would amount to	\$ 633,660
Assuming three regions are tackled consecutively, the support to the Secretariat would be divided by three: under those conditions, the total amount for a donor intending to support during two years one region (including 1 to 5 countries) would be.	\$ 172,000

