


FFA

FORUM FISHERIES COMMITTEE
ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTEENTH MEETING

Virtual
11 - 14 May 2021

Agenda Item:	5
Paper Number:	FFC118-WP02
Title:	Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary:

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching and continue to evolve. The paper is divided into three sections: (i) COVID-19 Landscape (ii) Building Resilience and (iii) Looking Forward. SPC Public Health Division have been invited to present in Section 1.

Recommendations:

Members are invited to:

- i. recognise the critical importance of staying abreast of how countries are managing the pandemic as this will help inform planning of our work;
- ii. discuss the evolving COVID-19 landscape and provide questions to SPC Public Health Division;
- iii. note the gains and innovation that will outlive the pandemic and which ensure a more resilient and thriving FFA;
- iv. discuss the challenges and possible steps to address these, which will be considered throughout the FFC agenda, including prioritisation of work; and
- v. submit any requests for assistance from the Secretariat.

I. INTRODUCTION

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching and continue to evolve. There has been much focus on responding to the pandemic and its impacts and doing what's necessary to succeed for now. However, it is critical that we continue to move past a 'survive' mindset to a 'thrive' one to ensure a more resilient FFA for tomorrow.

It is clear that the post-pandemic world will not be business as usual. So much has happened during this crisis that has changed our attitudes and opened our minds. What is so heartening amidst this evolving challenge with the pandemic is the renewed commitment of FFA Members to working together. Regional cooperation remains at the root of our survival and continues to be the platform for FFA to thrive.

FFA Members have had the opportunity to do things we previously did not think were possible and achieved so much despite the challenging operating environment. We have embraced the opportunity to use the disruption caused by COVID-19 as catalysts for reform. These gains will outlive the pandemic. This comes at a crucial and opportune time for Members as we implement our Strategic Plan 2020-2025.

The paper is divided into three sections:

- (i) **COVID-19 landscape** – at the outset, it is fundamental for FFA Members to stay abreast of how countries are managing the pandemic as this will help us to plan forward, to the extent possible, despite the evolving challenges;
- (ii) **Building resilience** – this past year, we have discussed the three key areas that continue to be impacted by the pandemic – work programme, MCS tools, and Members' economic and social benefits. This part will highlight the innovative progress that has been made in these areas and which we will continue to build on. We also recognise that there are ongoing challenges which we need to navigate, such as the difficulty in resolving complex issues on a virtual platform, heavy schedule of virtual meetings, and limited independent verifiable data due to the suspension of observers on purse seine vessels. We will need to collectively innovate and resolve these challenges;
- (iii) **Looking Forward** – the key question for all is when could the critical in-person meetings happen again. This part looks at the experiences in the past 15+ months to help inform how we may plan out our work.

II. COVID-19 LANDSCAPE

To date, most FFA Member countries have managed to successfully keep out the COVID-19 virus from their communities through their lockdown and border controls or by eliminating it on the rare occasion that it manages to get in. Few FFA Members are currently facing ongoing challenges due to community spread of COVID-19 leading to widespread lockdowns and severe strain on the health system and workers.

There are not many countries in the world that fall into this first group of countries (COVID-19 elimination countries). Countries outside of the region that have successfully pursued a policy of elimination of COVID-19 include Singapore, Chinese Taipei and China. A notable difference between these countries and most Pacific Island FFA Members is that (like Australia and New Zealand) they have established the infrastructure and systems for dealing with outbreaks of the disease.

The other group of countries are those in which COVID-19 is endemic – most of the world – which have pursued policies of suppression rather than elimination (COVID-19 suppression countries). These include the US, UK, Europe, most of Asia (Including India), Africa and Latin America (including Brazil).

To assist with understanding the COVID-19 landscape, SPC Public Health Division has been invited to make a presentation. Members will be offered an opportunity to ask any questions to SPC.

III. BUILDING RESILIENCE

(i) Work programmes

Efficiency and financial gains and investment in technology

COVID-19 has significantly changed the way we operate. Since March 2020, most meetings have been undertaken virtually. The efficiency provided by these virtual platforms has enabled short meetings with Members on specific subjects with streamlined meeting agendas.

The swift migration to, and heavy reliance on, these platforms to transact our work also resulted in more investments in technology – upgrading electronic meeting facilities, connectivity, suitable meeting rooms at the Secretariat and external IT support.

To assist Members with this migration, the Secretariat undertook a survey questionnaire to understand Members' technological needs. Based on this feedback, one of the key areas of assistance is that the Secretariat will be distributing video conferencing equipment in the next few weeks to enhance Members' participation in virtual meetings. These systems can also be used for other national needs such as online workshops or training. Further work also entails the improvement of internet bandwidth and strengthening of IT capacity at national level.

Funds towards more activities

Another advantage is that the Secretariat continues to deliver its priorities at relatively lower cost given the savings in travel since March 2020. Most funds previously allocated to travel have been reallocated to priority areas – such as observer safety and livelihoods, EM and ER, Climate Change, investment in technology, food security and strategic engagement. These priorities were covered in our FFA Circular 21/01 at the start of the new year. It has also been possible to progress some in-country work with Members through local consultants or FFA staff that are working remotely in countries such as PNG and Fiji, and of course in Solomon Islands where the Secretariat is based.

In addition, after using virtual means for more than a year, the Secretariat has a better appreciation of the benefits and challenges of working virtually. This will continue to greatly assist in planning for meetings and activities post-COVID that can continue to be held virtually or must be held physically.

These important efficiency and financial gains will outlast the pandemic.

Challenges

There are ongoing challenges as we navigate this new operating environment. It continues to be a challenge to progress work that is ideally suited to face-to-face engagement. A key example are the WCPFC-related meetings which can involve substantive and complex negotiations especially with other Commission Members. FFA Members raised to the Commission the challenge of negotiating such complex issues on virtual platforms. We were very aware of the risk of marginalising our Pacific Island administrations, especially smaller administrations, from effective participation and decision-making. As a result, a lot of work was pushed to 2021.

This has created another challenge with the significant number of virtual meetings, especially this year. To date, Members have done an excellent job within our current means to prepare and engage in these wider WCPFC discussions, including bilateral consultations. However, at the current rate of meetings and work as shown in Table 1 (an average of one meeting per week in 2021), we run the risk of insufficient time to prepare and coordinate for the wider WCPFC discussions.

It is important to note that the table is only for illustrative purposes and sets out only the fisheries meetings between FFA Members as well as the PNA and SPG meetings. It does not include (i) meetings related to the WCPFC (inclusive of the 7 bilateral consultations on the Tropical Tuna Measure), (ii) meetings related to other processes that Members may be involved in such as FAO, UN, and (iii) meetings related to CROP as well as other meetings that the Secretariat is involved in such as with donors and partners.

Table 1: Number of meetings & workshops involving only FFA Members (Jan - Dec)

	2018	2019	2020	2021*
Number of meetings & workshops	23	40	46	52
Days of meetings and workshops	74	127	129	150
Average meeting & workshop days	3.2	3.2	2.8	2.9

* 2021 meetings include those tentatively planned for the remainder of the year

Based on feedback from the current FFC Chair FSM and some Members, it is a struggle to keep up with the plethora of virtual meetings, both FFA and non-FFA, as well as Members' own national tasks. The burden on small administrations has been compounded during this pandemic.

In the discussions throughout the FFC agenda, it will be important for Members to determine what priority tasks can realistically be achieved this year. This is to ensure that we can manage the workload and expectations for the Members and the Secretariat based on what is achievable on these virtual platforms. Specific to WCPFC work, it will be essential to determine what is achievable for WCPFC18; this will be discussed further in **WP.06 Priorities for WCPFC**. This will assist Members in the short-term.

In the medium to longer-term, consistent with the vision in the FFA Strategic Plan, it is imperative as part of the implementation of this Plan that we achieve *Outcome 5 Our people are empowered*

through strong and effective national, sub-regional and regional fisheries organisations. This includes enhancing the capacity of national fisheries administrations to achieve their fisheries management and development aspirations as well as improving national capacity to meet the increasing responsibilities associated with the regional management of offshore fisheries. A central component of this will be the reforms required to the Country Service Level Agreements which will identify areas for strengthening capacity and training. The work on the CSLAs is highlighted in **WP.03 Implementation of the FFA Strategic Plan 2020-2025.**

Also, a significant amount of in-country work and training have been deferred because there are no local consultants available or travel to the Member countries is not possible. The Secretariat is also conscious of the strains of operating during the pandemic and competing national priorities that have taken up much of Members' time. Work areas that have been set back include work on investment frameworks and the development and implementation of national Tuna Management and Development Plans, including implementation of zone based limits.

Much of this work requires interactive discussion and workshopping of options and approaches and this is difficult to undertake virtually. This means that these tasks need to be extended so that work can be progressed when borders open and travel restrictions are eased. This also means that we have to prepare financially for possible no cost extensions for the relevant projects. This aspect is covered in **WP.18 2021/2022 Annual Work Plan and Budget.**

The Secretariat will continue to identify capacity and ways in which any of these important tasks can be delivered virtually. A recent example of this is the in-country Harvest Strategy training delivered jointly with SPC, which had been halted but has now been resumed online.

(ii) MCS tools

Monitoring and Surveillance support

RFSC and Regional Operations

COVID-19 had impacted on regional operations held in early 2020 (i.e. Operation Ra Balang and Tui Moana). There was decreased participation in operation Rai Balang in March 2020 and operation Tui Moana which was to be held in May 2020 was postponed. Members and surveillance partners used this period to review and adjust national processes as the pandemic evolved. The Secretariat, Members and surveillance partners have adjusted well to the pandemic resulting in full participation in operations Island Chief and Kurukuru in the second half of 2020 and Operation Rai Balang in 2021.

The Secretariat through the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre (RFSC) continued to provide contact tracing of specific vessels, identified possible transshipments and bunker proximity contacts, monitored and reported VMS/AIS tracks of potential IUU activity, and supported national tasks for surface assets. The RFSC COVID-19 responses include:

- development of a **weekly COVID-19 vessel movements register and on-request assistance to review vessel interaction** (through assisting Members risk assessment prior to port entry or at sea contact inspection),
- release of **weekly COVID-19 Vessel Movement Report** to all Members which identifies FFA registered vessels reporting on FFA VMS that have called in to and/or moved within 3nm of any land feature of twelve selected countries on a monthly time frame. It also identifies their current location at the time of report generation. The 12 countries assessed are those that

are most frequently visited by FFA registered vessels (outside the FFA Membership) and COVID-19 affected countries on the WHO list.

- continues to **maintain the RSP through daily analysis** to support national and regional MCS activities.

In response to Members' feedback on practical issues faced in implementing risk assessments of fishing vessels reporting directly to the WCPFC VMS, the Secretariat has initiated an additional Operation under the OP365 Framework named **"OPCOVID"**. The intended focus of OPCOVID will be to, *"support members MCS Operations and detail the provision of RFSC support to all FFA Members to safely operate in the COVID-19 environment"*.

OPCOVID is intended to be part of the ongoing MCS activities undertaken by the RFSC for the purposes of regional cooperation in enforcement of national and regional requirements and will go towards FFA members' MCS capability in the high seas, particularly during this pandemic. As such, the Secretariat, as an authorised MCS Entity for a number of FFA members will be requesting WCPFC non-public domain data, primarily high seas VMS data in accordance with the WCPFC Data Rules, for the purpose of OPCOVID, similar to what the RFSC routinely does when conducting MCS regional operation.

Regional Aerial Surveillance Program

Since the lifting of temporary suspension of aerial surveillance services on 1 July 2020, the ASP aircraft was able to undertake several surveillance flights including support to FFA-led surveillance operations. Between July and December 2020, 72 surveillance flights were undertaken in five countries (PNG, Solomon Is, Samoa, Tokelau and Tonga) where clearances were received. These flights were a direct result of successful dialogues and planning between the nations, the Secretariat, ADoD and the aircraft contractors to meet the aerial surveillance requests of nations. This is covered further in **WP.24 Aerial Surveillance Program-Information Ownership**.

Observer Programme

FFA members supported the ongoing extension of the WCPFC decisions on temporary suspension of observer coverage on purse seine vessels. However, FFA members have maintained that the temporary suspension of observer coverage on purse seine vessels is not the end goal and continued to highlight the desire to safely recommence deployment of observers on fishing vessels

While the temporary suspension of observers on purse seine vessels has implications on fisheries management frameworks, the significant impact is on observers in terms of sustaining their livelihoods due to loss of employment. There is also potential flow on effect of mass loss of observers due to observers seeking alternative employment opportunities. To address this issue, FFC114 tasked the Secretariat to undertake a study to look at options to address observer safety and sustained livelihoods. The recommendations from this Study and the plan to implement these recommendations was discussed at ROCW21 and the 24th MCS working group meeting.

One of the key recommendations in the Study was to consider developing practical plans to resume 100% observer coverage at the earliest time possible. This is in line with members' desire to commence redeployment of observers. The implementation plan for the observer livelihood and safety study recommendations and observer redeployment will be discussed in detail in **WP.12 Observer Safety and Livelihoods**.

FFA COVID-19 Operating Protocols for the Fishing Sector in the Pacific

The FFA COVID-19 Protocols developed to assist and guide the fishing sector, flag States, coastal and island State governments to manage the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 on the fishing industry in the Pacific islands region have been in place since August 2020.

One of the key priorities for FFA members was to raise the awareness of the Protocols as it supports increasing knowledge on facilitation of health and safety standards on fishing vessels. This included a regional workshop held in January 2021, and will be followed by national workshops and incorporating the Protocols into authorised officers and observer training courses. The work on these Protocols is further discussed in ***WP.02a COVID-19 Fisheries Protocols***.

(iii) Economic and social benefits

Regional and national assessments of the economic impacts

COVID mitigation measures continue to impact FFA members, nationals and industries. Major ongoing impacts include:

- a significant reduction in the operations of domestic longline fleets with corresponding reductions in employment, income, exports and related business activities.
- a significant reduction in opportunities for observers to secure placements and a consequent loss of income.

On the other hand, it is understood that revenues from the VDS have not been significantly affected and overall remains at similar levels to recent years.

The FFA Secretariat is currently working with Palau, Tonga and the Solomon Islands in undertaking national assessments of the economic impacts in relation to tuna fisheries of COVID-19 and associated mitigation measures. It is anticipated that this work will assist these Members to respond to, and mitigate, these impacts.

Food security and Gender

The significant economic impact on revenue streams from key sectors such as tourism this past year has underlined even further the importance of fisheries for economic development as well as food security. At FFCMIN17, Ministers “emphasised the importance of ensuring that the fisheries sector is supported and continues to function effectively to ensure that economic revenues and associated benefits, including food security continue to flow to Members during this extraordinary period”.

Studies are underway to estimate the amount of tuna and bycatch entering domestic markets as well as to examine potential ways in which tuna fisheries can increase its contribution to food security. This is covered further in ***INFO.12 Examining the Contribution of Tuna Fisheries to Regional Food Security*** and ***INFO.13 Examining comparative advantages in the region in relation to tuna related industries***.

In addition, work is underway to determine the impacts of COVID-19 on women in the tuna fisheries sector. Findings are to be presented, alongside other Gender and Social Inclusion work, at the FFA Gender Forum in the next FY. This is covered in ***INFO.09 Gender***.

IV. LOOKING FORWARD

Any look forward is speculation, but some conclusions can be drawn from our experience during the last 15+ months.

SPC has provided the COVID-19 landscape in Section II. It is crucial that we stay abreast with these developments to understand the evolving situation and plan out what we can. It's clear that vaccines (although not a panacea) and the ability for rapid testing will be significant considerations for Members which will continue to impact on FFA's work and any discussion related to travel for in-person meetings.

In planning our work, it is clear from Section III that there have been some real advantages in identifying work that can continue to be delivered virtually and investments in technology to facilitate this at the Secretariat and for Members. It is also clear that there have been some real challenges with undertaking some of our work fully and effectively due to the inability to meet physically. The classic example highlighted is the WCPFC-related discussions.

For these types of work, the key question arising is when can physical meetings take place again. The level of confidence of countries to take the risk of opening their borders and relaxing quarantine requirements will be central to this. The experiences around the world and how countries have made this determination are helpful to guiding how this may play out for FFA Members.

Experiences with opening borders

The past year or so has seen some countries open up their borders intermittently, mainly to allow in tourists and others to boost their flagging economies. Many have subsequently closed down again, as COVID infections have increased domestically as a result of the more liberal interaction of people and the greater opportunities this provides for the disease to spread. Vaccines will however facilitate opening up, once countries achieve high vaccination levels.

The tragic scenes in countries such as India and Brazil, and until recently the US, will however make some countries and their populations wary about taking undue risks in opening up. Some countries have been taking a differentiated approach, by identifying particularly high-risk countries and restricting travel from them.

As noted in Section II, countries may be divided roughly into 'COVID-19 elimination countries' or 'COVID-19 suppression countries'. As highlighted by SPC, most FFA Members have been successful in eliminating COVID-19 and this success is highly commendable. However, understandably, this very success may lead to greater caution for the opening up of borders by Members when compared with most other countries.

For those countries in which COVID-19 is endemic, opening up their borders is not such a dramatic step. They already have COVID-19 in the country, and although they will want to try to limit the additional cases that they import, if properly controlled there is unlikely to be a dramatic change to the *status quo* from opening up. This is particularly so if they have high rates of vaccination domestically.

However, for those countries which have successfully kept out COVID-19, opening up their borders (i.e. without quarantine requirements) is of an entirely different order. It is inevitable that COVID-19 will get in through the newly opened borders once quarantine is removed. Even with highly vaccinated populations, they will need to ensure that they are able to deal with the inevitable outbreaks. If there are parts of the country with less highly vaccinated populations (e.g. the rural

areas or outer provinces) they will be particularly vulnerable. As we have seen with FFA Pacific Island members, their governments and populations may understandably be reluctant to take such risks.

As has been highlighted by SPC, vaccinations are not a panacea. Therefore, requiring incoming travellers to be vaccinated will not completely remove these risks. While high domestic vaccination levels will limit the potential spread and speed of transmission, FFA Members opening their borders are going to need facilities that can provide specialist COVID-19 treatment, as well as other established and effective systems such as contact tracing to help keep outbreaks under control. As underlined by SPC, populations will also need to continue practising other precautions such as hand washing often, masking and social distancing, at the very least. More reliable rapid COVID-19 testing before entry may help, but at this stage it appears unlikely to be failsafe.

Barring any major technological advances in combating the disease, it therefore seems likely that most FFA Members may choose to keep their borders closed or at least subject to quarantine requirements before entry, for some time to come. This may be the case irrespective of a gradual loosening of entry requirements elsewhere in other parts of the world as vaccine rates increase there.

While travel bubbles may have their place in some situations, the dispersed geography and small populations of most FFA Members means that two-way quarantine-free travel between most members is unlikely to be viable on their own. Also, as soon as flights include unquarantined passengers, they become high risk to Member countries. As we have seen in the region, this will require quarantine requirements on arrival.

There are various implications for FFA Members and the Secretariat from this analysis.

Meetings

As highlighted in Section II, although Members and the Secretariat have adapted well to using virtual meetings, these have their limitations especially for substantive and complex negotiations and policy development. In-person meetings are more successful in producing good outcomes, and personal relationships matter in getting good results. As noted, negotiations in external fora such as WCPFC are particularly difficult in a virtual setting.

For these types of key meetings, FFA should move back to in-person meetings as soon as the environment permits. At the more extreme end of the spectrum, the scenario of a country representative travelling to a meeting, then spending two weeks in quarantine in the host country before the meeting, then participating in the meeting for one or two weeks, then travelling home and spending two weeks in quarantine in their home country before being on the job again, is not viable. Even if the host country did not require quarantine (and possibly Australia and New Zealand might loosen quarantine restrictions ahead of some other Members), it is potentially still not viable. The more people required to participate in a physical meeting, the more the risk; and if people are to participate from outside the region, this creates an even greater risk.

It appears that there are several factors that might need to be present before serious consideration can be given to holding physical meetings between our Member countries, such as:

- *Host country* – no infections or low infections that are managed; high vaccination levels, including border control staff, hotel and transport staff and any nationals that would be supporting the meeting and delegates; well-established systems, resources and health infrastructure to deal with any outbreak;
- *Availability of flights* given the irregular international travel schedule;

- *Delegates* – fully vaccinated before travel, and may need to accept quarantine or self-isolation on return.

This may be increasing in prospect as bubbles are created between FFA members. Travel bubbles are in place for Cook Islands, New Zealand and Australia. However, the challenge is that the situation is changing all the time (i.e. the recent suspension in the travel bubble between New Zealand and New South Wales) and the opportunity to physically meet is getting pushed further out. Those in 'COVID-19 elimination countries' will be looking across at those in 'COVID-19 suppression countries' and be very wary of taking risks, noting the disruption and cost of the virus entering and getting a foothold in the community is immense.

At the end of the day, FFA Member governments will make the best determination of when it is safe to open the borders, remove quarantine requirements and allow citizens to travel. We recognise that the most important meetings in the region are those involving Leaders. Once governments have determined that it is viable for Leaders to meet physically, it may perhaps be possible to either tag on specialist meetings, such as for fisheries, for accompanying Ministers and officials, or to have these meetings precede Leaders' meetings.

In addition, as highlighted above, the virtual format is less than ideal for training and assistance. They also benefit greatly from personal participation and interaction, in effectively conveying the training material and obtaining the full engagement and responses of participants.

Until the in-person format is again viable, however, the virtual format will need to act as a substitute for meetings, including trainings. At the same time, we will need to prioritise what work is possible on these virtual platforms and continue to identify technological solutions, including interactive platforms, to deliver this work as effectively as possible.

Operational matters

The foregoing analysis would also directly impact on operational matters, such as the Observer Programme, which would be affected by a delay in the introduction of quarantine free travel. This needs to be considered in the broader discussion on observer safety and their possible redeployment in ***WP.12 Observer Safety and Livelihoods*** as well as seafarers in general in ***WP.02a COVID-19 Fisheries Protocols***. Also relevant are the technological advances to enhance analytics and intelligence support will be covered in ***WP.09 Enhancing tools and partnerships to combat IUU fishing***.