

**FFA**

FORUM FISHERIES COMMITTEE
ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTEENTH MEETING

25 - 28 May 2021

Agenda Item:	5
Paper Number:	<i>FFC118-WP.02 a</i>
Title:	COVID Protocols (and Vaccinations of fishing crew)

Summary:

COVID-19 is a new dimension to business (and the fishing environment) that will not go away in the foreseeable future so COVID-19 management and mitigation will continue to be a consideration in all future planning. This paper is a joint paper prepared in consultation with the Fisheries COVID-19 Protocols Steering Committee (the Office of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, the Pacific Community, Australia's Office of the Pacific (DFAT), MRAG Asia Pacific and the FFA) and presents the status of the Protocols and current discussions related to the vaccination of fishing crew.

Recommendations:

The Committee is invited to:

1. Recognise the critical importance of continuing to implement the COVID-19 Protocols, particularly hygiene and quarantine protocols;
2. Note the guidance from the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) that all Governments prioritise seafarers in their National COVID-19 vaccination programmes;
3. Note the considerations related to the vaccination of fishing crew and the importance of vaccinating seafarers both to avoid transmission between ports [buffer] and to maintain economic activity in our region; and
4. Provide direction for supporting vaccination of seafarers:
 - a. Recommend all seafarers receive a complete course of COVID-19 vaccination through their National Vaccination Programs;
 - b. Encourage vessel operator responsibility for vaccinating their crew and consider a phased approach for including Vaccine Certification in the Regional Harmonised Minimum Terms and Conditions that is aligned with regional IMO protocols for seafarers;
 - c. Recommend all new seafarers have evidence of a complete course of COVID-19 vaccination prior to boarding the vessel; and
 - d. Encourage all governments to include seafarers as a priority group for COVID-19 vaccination in their respective countries.

Introduction

Members will note that as a result of a directive from FFC114 to develop Protocols to minimize the COVID-19 risks in the fishing sector, COVID-19 Protocols were finalised and circulated at the beginning of September 2020. A workshop, held in January 2021, identified several issues which were considered in the first formal review of the Protocols. The reviewed Protocols were finalized and circulated to members at the beginning of April 2021 and is available online on www.ffa.int/covid19. More recently there were discussions relating to the urgent need to vaccinate crew and observers which is being analysed below for the consideration of members.

COVID19 Protocols Regional Workshop

Recognising the need to raise the profile of the Protocols, a COVID-19 Protocols Regional Workshop was held online on 27-28 January 2021 where participants considered the vaccine rollout plans and recommended that standards be developed for inoculating the Fisheries Sector including a procedural guide for Quarantine standards. They also noted the need for appropriate protocols related to enforcement action to IUU vessels and a need to translate the SPC Health Posters and update the Health Contact details in the Protocols. Notably, a survey conducted at the workshop indicated that 60% of Members use the Protocols and 50% have utilized the protocols to develop respective SOE Orders.

Review of the COVID-19 Protocols

These were considered by the SC in their review process and is addressed in the following changes incorporated in this draft Protocols document:

- A new Principle 6 on COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination under the General COVID19 Risk Mitigation Protocols
- Updates to reflect automated processes under the PNA FIMS app.
- A new section on additional Considerations for Vessels detained following Compliance inspections (included under Annex 2 on Vessel Compliance Inspections in Port and at Sea).
- Updates throughout the Protocols to reflect the considerations for certified vaccinations and/or testing
- An amendment to reflect that the Protocols will be documented and updated as circumstances change. A formal review will be carried out at least every 6 months if not updated sooner. (i.e. the next review will be held in September 2021 unless updates are required before then).

Vaccination of fishing crew

Status and risks

There are increasing reports of COVID-19 cases, including deaths, amongst fishing crew in other ocean areas such as the Indian ocean. COVID-19 infections on-board fishing vessels are especially challenging for operators as the vessels are often thousands of kilometres from their home ports or the countries from which the crew were from. Furthermore, the level of medical care available in ports varies across the region and any outbreaks onboard vessels that require treatment increases the risk of transmission.

Closer to home, in the Pacific there has been a recent rise in maritime transmissions via cargo ships, and there continues to be passenger transmissions via air travel, most of which have been managed with mandatory quarantine of air passengers. Merchant vessels originating in the Philippines have had numerous COVID-19 cases and there are also three examples of crew infections on board container ships that travelled from PNG with one being held in quarantine in Solomon Islands, and others in Australia and Vanuatu. Within our islands region an outbreak on board a vessel would put our port states at risk of transmission and potentially overwhelm our limited capacity to treat such an outbreak even if not additionally spread in the community.

In March 2021 the heads of five United Nations organisations, including the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) issued a joint statement calling for maritime and air transport workers to be prioritised for COVID-19 vaccination. Specifically, the Secretary General of the IMO said on 19 March 2021 “As vaccination is rolled out in many countries, I urge Governments to prioritize seafarers in their National COVID-19 *vaccination programs*”.

Fishing crew are a key group of Seafarers in the Pacific, and ensuring they are all vaccinated will:

- protect their health enabling fishing to continue safely,
- reduce the risk of potential transmission into Pacific Island communities from fishing crew, and
- minimise and prevent significant disruption to fishing operations that could jeopardise critical revenue to Pacific economies.

The potential Economic impacts of the pandemic on the fishery sector

Our region’s economies are heavily dependent upon Fishing, Tourism and in a few cases mineral revenues. There has been a significant disruption to tourism as a result of pandemic related travel restrictions which have impacted the more tourism dependent PICs. To date those economies heavily dependent on the Tuna fishery, (such as the PNA nations where VDS revenues contribute typically 40-80% of GDP), have been largely unimpacted. However,

based upon the experiences in other oceans, eg Indian and Eastern Pacific, the potential impact is at least 50% drop in effort [revenues] and output due to disruptions in the fishery, Potentially COVID-19 infection in our fishery could result in a 50% drop in GDP for our vulnerable island economies, plus the added burden on our island nation health care even if the outbreak does not extend to those living in the community of our port states. IThere would therefore be a significant impact to our PICs economically (and socially) if a pandemic were to spread on vessels fishing in the Pacific both directly as a result of the reduced fisheries revenues and added costs of addressing affected seafarers and indirectly as island economies divert limited funding to addressing the risk or actual community transmissions. In reality most would not have the capacity to cater for affected crew and may have to deny port entry to any infected vessels.

Responsibility and challenges with vaccination

While vaccinating seafarers and fishing crew is a priority, the vaccine access and administration medical requirements/logistics need to be carefully considered. Cold chain management must be met and doses administered by trained personnel in health care settings.

Recognising that supply continues to be a key challenge globally, the World Health Organisation Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) has provided a roadmap for prioritising uses of COVID-19 Vaccines in the context of limited supply. This roadmap is based on the principle that countries are developing their own vaccination plans and is intended to serve as guidance on preparing for vaccine prioritisation decisions within countries.

While decisions on vaccination priority are a national decision, FFA members can join calls from the IOM and other UN bodies to encourage all governments to include seafarers as a priority group for vaccination. If all countries take this step, it will help increase the supply and speed with which vaccines are available to fishing crew across the region as well as in flag states and crew members states.

At a vessel level, it is important to distinguish that fishing vessel operators are ultimately responsible for the safety and welfare of their crew. As such, fishing operators and businesses must take a leading role in prioritising the welfare of their crew and ensuring they are vaccinated.

FFA members could strengthen the responsibility requirements for fishing vessels operators to ensure their crew are vaccinated through considering making it a condition of fishing under their licences. This would need to be a phased approach and careful consideration is needed on how long this would take, recognising the practical challenges of vaccine supply, crew turnover and administering the necessary number of doses.

Including vaccination of fishing crew within the Regional Harmonised Minimum Terms and Conditions (HMTCs) has been discussed and it was acknowledged that there are difficulties with mandatory vaccination requirements. If Vaccines are mandated and supplied by the port state, there are significant indemnity and liability implications. However, globally there is increased focus on Vaccine Certification and developing relevant guidelines and protocols for seafarers to be vaccinated. The IOM in particular is looking into this and the IOM Secretary General has called for this work to be prioritised.

There are benefits to a regional approach that sets standards for vaccine requirements and ensures there is a coordinated approach on prioritising seafarers for vaccinations. A potential way forward is to support a phased approach to require Vaccine Certification for all fishing crew in line with relevant IMO Guidelines and Protocols for all seafarers (under development). The FFA Secretariat and the Steering Committee can follow this up and develop a proposal on how this could be implemented within the regional HMTCs.

Ultimately how seafarers and fishing crew get vaccinated is going to vary across the region. However, there is an opportunity to strengthen and speed up the process through regional cooperation to advocate for seafarers to be prioritised through national vaccination programs and reinforce the responsibility of fishing operators to ensure their crew are vaccinated before a trip commences and when they changeover crew. Industry can also take the lead in this area.

Evidence of vaccination may also need to be considered and validation of documentation of administration, e.g. Vaccination Certificates. PNA FIMS has the facility to record vaccinations.

While there is increasing focus on vaccination programs, it is critical that the COVID-19 protocols continue to be followed. This is especially important for measures relating to hygiene, social distancing and quarantining/isolating confirmed and suspected cases.