

**Briefing Paper for the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
18th Meeting of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission**

Background: WECAFC operates as a regional fisheries body under Article VI of the FAO Constitution and acts in an advisory capacity to promote the effective conservation, management, and development of living marine resources in the Wider Caribbean. It has 34 members, including the United States, and aims to meet on a biennial basis. There are 11 working groups under the auspices of WECAFC, which have specific terms of reference. Fishery scientists, experts, and managers participate in the working groups through the representation of their member countries. Relevant regional and sub-regional organizations are also represented upon invitation.

Summary: The 18th meeting of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) took place 26-29 July 2022. The meeting was held virtually under the leadership of the U.S. Chair, Deirdre Warner-Kramer (State Department, Office of Marine Conservation). Seventeen members of WECAFC participated: Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Dominica, EU, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Venezuela.

The U.S. delegation was led by Carolyn Gruber (State Department, Office of Marine Conservation), with participation of staff from the NOAA Fisheries Office of International Affairs, Trade, and Commerce; NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office; Caribbean Fishery Management Council; Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; South Atlantic Fishery Management Council; and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Nancie Cummings (NOAA Fisheries' Southeast Fishery Science Center) also participated as Chair of the WECAFC Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) and Chair of the Fisheries Data Statistics (FDS) Working Group.

At the meeting, the Commission endorsed several important non-binding documents and recommendations. These included a Data Collection Reference Framework (DCRF), which provides guidance for standardized data collection on key indicators and species in the region. A regional database (Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Information System, or "WECAFIS") will provide WECAFC with information for the monitoring of priority species and future stock assessments. A related recommendation strongly encourages members to proceed with the use of DCRF for monitoring and reporting, and recognizes further investments are needed to build national capacities for data collection, analysis, and reporting.

A Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan, focusing on Nassau grouper and mutton snapper, was endorsed by the Commission, which aims to strengthen the management of fish that aggregate to spawn and reverse the declines of species that are vulnerable to overexploitation. The United States – through the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC) – provided support for the development of this plan and an accompanying Communications Strategy. The conservation of Nassau grouper is a U.S. priority; this species is listed as Threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed in Annex III of the Protocol for Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife in the Caribbean (SPAW Protocol).

An accompanying recommendation was adopted, calling for adoption and implementation of the Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Management Plan, and actions to improve regional data collection, assessment, communication, and outreach for the conservation of fish spawning aggregations and mobilization of resources for priority research and monitoring.

A recommendation was adopted aimed at helping WECAFC members combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by encouraging strengthened fisheries governance; implementation of measures to effectively regulate, monitor, and control transshipment; and development of mechanisms for sharing fishing vessel information. WECAFC members will continue intersessional work to implement the Regional Plan of Action on IUU Fishing.

The Commission endorsed a recommendation on queen conch reaffirming its commitment to implementation and continued monitoring of the *Regional Queen Conch Fishery Management and Conservation Plan* (endorsed by the Commission at its 16th meeting), promoting genetic work on population structure and traceability, and encouraging collaboration with the Regional Working Group on IUU fishing.

Several documents promoting the sustainable management of fishing on Moored Fish Aggregating Devices (MFADs) were adopted by the Commission on an interim basis. These included a Caribbean Regional Management Plan for MFADs and a guide for improved monitoring of MFAD catches and improved assessment of MFAD impact on stocks. The documents will be reviewed and revised intersessionally. The Commission adopted a related recommendation charging the MFAD Working Group with finalizing the regional MFAD management plan and guidance document to inform the development of national management plans and legislation (if relevant), promoting data collection and analysis to inform decision making on MFAD fisheries, supporting the establishment of stakeholder outreach and communication campaigns, and encouraging research in several key areas.

The Commission also adopted a Regional Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (RPOA-Sharks). The RPOA-Sharks is aimed at ensuring the conservation and management of sharks and their long-term sustainable use in the WECAFC area. This regional plan sets out five objectives and provides a table of actions to achieve these objectives.

The Commission supported WECAFC becoming signatory to a Memorandum of Understanding that would establish a non-binding coordination mechanism in the wider Caribbean region towards oceans-based sustainable development, and endorsed an exchange of letters of cooperation between WECAFC and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). The letters will provide a basis for collaborative work between the two organizations on issues of mutual interest under the umbrella of ICCAT's existing cooperative agreement with FAO. WECAFC also adopted a new Strategic Plan for 2022-2027 and a comprehensive Work Program for 2022-2024. At the request of the United States, the work program was amended to include a meeting of the Flyingfish-Dolphinfish Working Group and the Recreational Fisheries Working Group. (The Commission agreed at its last meeting – as a result of a U.S. recommendation – that the Flyingfish Working Group should be broadened to look at dolphinfish and other pelagic species that are not managed by ICCAT. The working group was unable to meet prior to WECAFC18, but a meeting is tentatively scheduled for 2023.)

The Commission only briefly discussed the possible transformation of WECAFC towards becoming a strengthened regional fishery entity or arrangement with binding management authority. In 2019, the Commission endorsed a roadmap for a member-driven and inclusive process to advance the development of a model for a regional fisheries management entity or arrangement in the WECAFC area but intersessional progress during the pandemic was limited. At WECAFC18, the Commission reaffirmed the roadmap, expressed support for holding a second preparatory meeting (the first preparatory meeting took place in March 2019) to further consider all the options, the advantages and disadvantages of these options, and make recommendations to the Commission on a way forward. The timing and venue of the next Commission meeting was not determined; a decision will be made intersessionally.

Upcoming Events of Interest:

Fifth Meeting of the CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM Working Group on Spawning Aggregations: 24-25 January 2023

Sixth Meeting of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch: 26 January 2023

First Meeting of the Flyingfish-Dolphinfish Working Group: TBD 2023

Additional Information:

For more information, please visit WECAFC's website at: <https://www.fao.org/wecafc/en/>.

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