

8. FAO COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES (COFI)

Summary of role: COFI is the subsidiary body of the FAO Council, established at its 13th Meeting in 1965 to be the only global intergovernmental forum where major international fisheries and aquaculture problems and issues are examined. Plastics are relevant in the work of COFI in dealing with abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gears (ALDFG).

Summary of recommendations and work status: FAO has undertaken projects and studies on reducing ALDFG and the effects of microplastics in fisheries and aquaculture:

- (i) FAO voluntary guidelines on the marking of fishing gear
- (ii) A global feasibility project on the marking of fishing aggregating devices (completed)
- (iii) A field project in Indonesia focused on the practical application of gear marking and lost gear retrieval in small-scale coastal fisheries (completed)
- (iv) Study on microplastics in fisheries and aquaculture

Keywords/research fields: FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI); function and mandate; work on marine plastics: Abandoned; Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gears; ALDFG; gear marking; lost gear retrieval; voluntary guidelines; work on marine plastics: microplastics; plastic and microplastics in fisheries and aquaculture; FAO Fisheries Circular 1163; Symposium on Responsible Fishing Technology for Healthy Ecosystems and Clean Environment; FAO study on Microplastics in Fisheries and Aquaculture

8.1 Function and mandate

The Committee on Fisheries (COFI), which was established in 1965, is a subsidiary body of the Council of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), a specialized agency of the UN. It is an intergovernmental forum where major international fisheries and aquaculture problems and issues are examined, and global recommendations and guidelines are adopted. Treaties have also been negotiated under the auspices of COFI.

Brunei Darussalam and Lao PDR are the only states of Southeast and East Asia that are not a member of COFI.

8.2 Work on marine plastics: combating ALDFG

A main topic of focus of the FAO is on combatting ALDFG. It aims to reduce ALDFG by 2025 by combatting, minimising and eliminating ALDFG and facilitating the identification and recovery of such gear.

The FAO's 2016 study on the global status of ALDFG with respect to gillnets and trammel nets showed a lack of data for Southeast Asia (available: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5051e.pdf>).

A field project was deployed in Indonesia in 2017–2018 on the practical application of gear marking and lost gear retrieval in small-scale coastal fisheries. Under this project, a workshop on gillnet marking and retrieval in Indonesian small-scale fisheries was organised in Bogor in January 2018. Participants to the workshop highlighted that gear marking is viewed as an effective tool in achieving better management tool fishing gear, but needs to be incorporated into a wider holistic framework of best practice measures to achieve maximum effectiveness (available: <http://www.fao.org/blogs/blue-growth-blog/towards-voluntary-guidelines-on-marking-fishing-gear/en/>).

At its 33rd session in July 2018, FAO-COFI adopted a set of Voluntary Guidelines on the Marking of Fishing Gears to assist states and regional fisheries bodies (RFBs), including regional fisheries management organisations and arrangements (RFMO/As), in developing and applying a system for the marking of fishing gear and related measures to address ALDFG (available: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca3546t/ca3546t.pdf>).

The Voluntary Guidelines provide:

- Practical means of locating and identifying the ownership of fishing gear;
- Guiding text on the development of appropriate marking systems;
- A framework for undertaking risk assessment to identify the appropriateness or otherwise of implementing a system for marking fishing gear; and
- A basis for the preparation of recommendations and regulations designed to minimise the abandonment loss and discarding of fishing gears and encourage recovery of ALDFG.

Additionally, in 2018, the FAO published the Fisheries Circular 1163 on “[s]takeholders' views on methods to identify the ownership and track the position of drifting fish aggregating devices used by tuna purse seine fisheries”. This Circular was the result of an FAO global survey on the marking of fish aggregating devices (FADs) that was initiated in 2017. (See: <https://www.wcpfc.int/node/30924>.)

On 8–12 April 2019, the ICES-FAO Working Group on Fishing Technology and Fish Behaviour held a Symposium on Responsible Fishing Technology for Healthy Ecosystems and Clean Environment in Shanghai, China. One session of the Symposium was on ‘ALDFG: Assessment of quantity and measures to prevent ALDFG and its impact’. (See: <http://wgftfb2019.org/web/assets/Uploads/FTFB-2019-ABSTRACT-20190404-update.pdf>.)

COFI also collaborates with other organisations on ALDFG and marine litter. In addition to the GPML, COFI is involved in the Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI), and engages, advises and holds workshops with the fishing industry.

Of note, despite the recognition of the problem of ghost nets in the region, the Asia Pacific Fisheries Commission (APFIC) website does not mention ALDFG. The last reports published by the APFIC in 2016 and 2017 do not mention ALDFG either. The APFIC was established as the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council under the APFIC Agreement in 1948 by the FAO. It is a FAO Regional Fishery Body. (See FAO (2017) Asia-Pacific Fishery Commission, “Report of the Seventy-sixth Session of the Executive Committee of the Asia-Pacific Fishery Commission, Manila, the Philippines, 21–23 February 2017, Bangkok”. Available: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7600e.pdf>.)

8.3 Work on marine plastics: Microplastics

In its July 2018 meeting, COFI expressed concern about the effects of pollution (including microplastics, from gold mining and other sources) on aquatic resources, and encouraged the FAO to continue collecting information on its impacts on aquaculture and fishery resources, as well as its implications for food safety, both in marine and freshwater systems, including through the work of the EAF-Nansen Programme (<http://www.fao.org/in-action/eaf-nansen/en/>).

The decision was based on an FAO Study on Microplastics in Fisheries and Aquaculture dated June 2018. The study found that there was a growing amount of micro- and nanoplastics in aquatic environments but a general lack of understanding on this issue (e.g. occurrence of microplastics, sources and flow). However, the study also found that current knowledge suggested that trophic transfer of microplastics would not lead to accumulation in seafood, and that associated PBTs and additives would have a negligible effect on the total human dietary intake of these compounds. These findings are nevertheless still under scientific investigation. The study is available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/MX201EN/mx201en.pdf>.

The study recommended:

- Application of a risk assessment approach to both environmental risk and potential human health risk through targeted monitoring of microplastic in the environment, biota and seafood product and hotspots identification for prioritization;
- Quantification of relative contributions from land-based and sea-based sources and investigation of pathways; and
- More collaboration between International organisations and regional organisations (such as regional fisheries organisations and Regional Seas programmes) on microplastic and nanoplastic contamination of aquatic environments and potential impacts on food safety and fishery and aquaculture resources.

The next meeting of COFI is scheduled for 13-17 July 2020 in Rome.