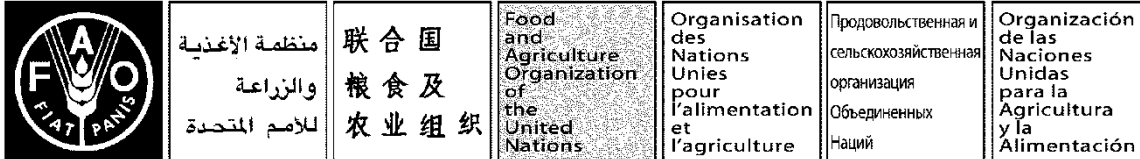


April 2025

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WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION (WECAFC)
THIRTEENTH (VIRTUAL) SESSION OF THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY GROUP (SAG)
23-24 April 2025
Intersessional activities by WECAFC Secretariat: Coordination of the activities of the advisory groups, the IWG/Strategic reorientation process, the Executive Committee and other major actions to support the achievement of the goals and objectives of the Commission

This document gives an overview of the intersessional activities of the Secretariat of WECAFC, as outlined in the Focus area 4. “Fostering a conducive environment within the WECAFC Secretariat to support the achievement of the goals and objective of the Commission of the endorsed 2022–2027 Strategic Plan of the Commission (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9116t>).

In this intersession, the Chair of the Commission is the Honourable Minister Floyd Green from Jamaica, the First Vice-Chair is from “Other WECAFC membership”, the Honourable Vice-Minister Rony Leiva Martinez, and since 17 March 2025, Mr Pedro Emilio Guerra Castellano, from Venezuela; the Second Vice-Chair from OSPESCA group, Ms Joandry Cabrera up until February 2025, now Mr. Idelfonso De Los Angeles, from the Dominican Republic, and the Chair of the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG), Ms Nancie Cummings. SAG is composed of five members, while of the 11 WGs¹, five undertook activities within the framework of the 2023–2025 Programme of Work endorsed at the 19th Session of WECAFC (WECAFC19) in September 2023 (<https://www.fao.org/wecafc/recommendations-work-plan/en/>).

1. Activities of the Executive Committee of the Commission

The focus of the Executive Committee was on four main deliverables during this intersession, all of which were follow-up actions from WECAFC19:

- The framework of cooperation (Exchange of Letters) with the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) was signed in March 2024. Following few rounds of amendments which engaged all the members and ICCAT contracting parties at their 28th Regular Meeting in November 2023, the EoL was finalized on 25 January 2024 following the positive feedback from the Legal Division of FAO. It was then signed intersessionally, on 8 March 2024 by Mr Camille Jean Pierre Manel, Executive Secretary of ICCAT, and on 21 March 2024 by Mr Manuel Barange, Assistant Director-General/Director of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division (NFI), the Representative designated by the WECAFC Secretary. A Press Release related to the signing of this agreement has been published on the website of the FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean via the following link: <https://www.fao.org/americas/news/news-detail/world-tuna-day/en>
- The negotiations towards the finalization of the revised Rules of Procedure initiated soon after WECAFC19 have been highly engaging for members and went on until early 2025. The final version sent to the FAO Legal Division on 5 February 2025 was slightly reviewed and submitted as a matter of urgency by this Division on 4 April 2025 to the FAO Director-General for approval.
- The Strategic reorientation of the Commission in a regional fishery management entity/RFME or arrangement/RFMA). Though under the leadership of the Chair of the Commission, this work area is coordinated by a group of member representatives in an ad hoc intersessional working group (IWG), supported by a Drafting Group (D-G). This member-driven groupwork, revamped during WECAFC19, is yet to retrieve its full positive dynamics embraced following the First Preparatory Meeting held in Barbados and the 17th plenary of the Commission in the United States of America, in 2019. Perhaps the implications of the most recent instruments, the WTO Agreement on fisheries subsidies and the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction or BBNJ Agreement would be a traction for more engagement of WECAFC members, so that the work being planned under the D-G process delivers a substantive output to underpin fruitful deliberations at the 20th plenary (WECAFC20) slated for July 2025. Two consultants whose TORs were drafted by the D-G members, then finalized by FAO, have been hired since XX April 2025 by WECAFC Secretariat to support the D-G. Their deliverables are expected to be tabled at WECAFC20, as there is little time, and the limited resources constrain the organization in this time of a Second Preparatory meeting.

¹ [Working Groups | Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission \(WECAFC\) | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#)

- The calls to members to fill the vacant positions within the advisory bodies and the D-G. The membership within SAG is indeed low, short of four more volunteering scientists. In the development of the soon to be approved Rules of Procedure of the Commission, members advocated and endorsed for an increase from seven to nine SAG members. SAG membership is currently five, with four from the “Other members”, and one from CRFM membership. Only three of the five active members are committed. Given that many of the volunteer officers are not always available, a heavy burden is laid on few scientists, which undermines effective delivery by this important body. The situation of the WGs is not much better, as there are real dropout and commitment issues in the WGs. As of the date of this report’s preparation, of the 11 WGs, the four with conveners from CRFM membership are actively contributing to the intersessional work, compared with two of the four from “Other members”, and two of the three OSPESCA members, that are active.

2. Activities of the Scientific Advisory Group

SAG members had their periodic calls, and a couple of meetings with WGs that have committed conveners. The main intersessional support by SAG to WGs is the leadership in Activity “4.7 Produce a Registry of experts, resource persons in any of the species/thematic Working Groups of the Commission” of the 2023-2025 Programme of Work of the Commission. It delivered a draft template for use in informing the registry of experts, which was tabled at the “First (Hybrid) Meeting on Development of a Template and Sustainability Plan for a Registry of Experts and Resource Persons for the WECAFC Region”, held 24–25 October 2024 in Panama. The version 3 of the template, presented by the Secretariat and the Chair of SAG following inputs from the conveners, was reviewed; a way forward for its finalization, data call, and sustainability plan for maintenance and periodic updates, were discussed. It is foreseen that the subsequent iteration from exchanges with participants and integrating the IT support perspective would be presented to the Commission in July 2025.

Four options were identified for ensuring the maintenance and sustainability to be submitted to the Commission for deliberations:

- Members rotate every two years the responsibility for the registry maintenance and validation in alignment with Chairmanship rotation – 1st choice
- Regional fisheries bodies/partner organizations (CRFM, OSPESCA, other Group’s designated entity)- 2nd choice
- Individual subregional projects, especially where WECAFC WGs are earmarked to provide assistance - discussed
- Partnerships with industry - discussed

It is expected that the full process will unfold by the third quarter of 2025 when populating the registry (data calls) will be initiated.

3. Activities of the working groups

Of the 11 WGs of the Commission, the following two had intersessional meetings as planned:

- Sixth meeting of the WECAFC WG on Spawning Aggregations, held in hybrid format from 6 to 7 June 2024 in Puerto Rico, United States of America and virtually. This WG was supported by an European Union’s Directorate General for Maritime Affairs (DG MARE)-funded project “*Improving ecosystem approach to fisheries by advancing fish spawning aggregation information gathering and increase of public engagement in the WECAFC region.*”, involving the Fisheries Data and Statistics (FDS) WG in the pilot implementation of the Regional Fish Spawning

Aggregation Management Plan (RFSAMP) in the Bahamas, Belize, and Cuba. The project was operational from 1 January 2022 to 31 October 2024.

- First meeting of the WECAFC WG on Flyingfish and Dolphinfinch, held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, United States of America and virtually from 4 to 5 June 2024.

Intersessional meetings are foreseen in the second half of 2025, gathering (i) the FDS, Caribbean Spiny lobster (CSL) and IUU WGs supported by the project, “*Enhance data collection and monitoring for sustainable spiny lobster fisheries, and concurrently develop practical approaches to characterize illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) with focus on small-scale fisheries in the WECAFC region*” also funded by EU-DG Mare, and (ii) at least one virtual meeting for any of the WGs that have not met for a while/at last three years.

WECAFC WGs are contemplated to/have been providing support to regional projects, in particular GEF-funded projects, which feature WECAFC as one of the implementing partners:

- The “*BE-CLME+*”: *Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities Through Marine Spatial Planning in the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem Plus*, a USD 6.5 million project which covers six countries (Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama and Saint Lucia).
- *Enhancing capacity for the adoption and implementation of EAF in the shrimp and groundfish fisheries of the North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem (EAF4SG)*, a USD 1.8 million project supporting Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.
- *Strategies, technologies and social solutions to manage bycatch in tropical Large Marine Ecosystem Fisheries (REBYC-III CLME+)*, a USD 6.5 million project benefiting Barbados, Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.
- *The Protecting and Restoring the Ocean’s natural Capital, building Resilience and supporting region-wide Investments for sustainable Blue socioeconomic development (PROCARIBE+)*, a 5-year project of USD 15.4.

Discussions are ongoing to engage the CSL in ghost fishing activities to be implemented in the region by OSPESCA, from of an FAO global project, “*Plastic Reduction in the Oceans: Sustaining and Enhancing Actions on Sea-based Sources (PRO-SEAS)*”.

4. Other issues: Partnership and Resource mobilization, and information sharing

Under the coordination of its Secretariat, WECAFC partnered with the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI) in the organization of the “First (Hybrid) Meeting on Development of a Template and Sustainability Plan for a Registry of Experts and Resource Persons for the WECAFC Region”. At that regional meeting, a brainstorming on ideas for a project proposal took place, which would engage multiple working groups in national pilots of development and/or implementation of regional instruments (management plan, plan of action, strategy, recommendation, resolution, etc.), with a view to mobilizing funding. This strategic shift in the Commission’s approach aims to improve adoption and enforcement by member states, while strengthening collaboration within WGs and with national institutions. A two-page concept note on supporting the management and development of Flyingfish-Dolphinfinch fisheries (to also involve Recreational, Fisheries Data and Statistics, anchored Fish Aggregating Devices, and IUU fishing WGs) was delivered. The Secretariat is currently in dialogue with potential donors. If successful, development for a full-fledged document would then be given a go ahead before the end of 2025.

Following the signature of the Exchange of Letters with ICCAT in March 2024, the two fisheries bodies are now in the planning phase of their first joint workshop, to be tentatively held on 7–8 May 2025, funded from the United States' Capacity Building Fund at ICCAT. This initial workshop would focus on an exchange of information concerning a high priority area of mutual interest: the provision of technical assistance to support improvements in fisheries data collection and reporting in the WECAFC region and overlapping ICCAT Convention area.

WECAFC Secretariat received feedback from the language reconciliation by the FAO Legal Division for the signature of the non-legally binding "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) enabling the creation of a coordination mechanism to support integrated ocean governance in the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems". The comments were addressed and communication on action to be taken by the Secretariat of the MoU was conveyed. It is now expected that the FAO-WECAFC signing would occur in the coming weeks, at least before the May 2025 First Meeting of the Ocean Coordination Mechanism (OCM) Steering Group to enable the Commission's participation as a full member in the OCM.

Through direct involvement of its Secretariat or a member of the Executive Committee, WECAFC attended/contributed to the following fora:

- Fourth Meeting of the Global Dialogue of the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI), with Regional Seas Organizations and Regional Fisheries Bodies, in the City of Seoul, Republic of Korea, 11–14 June 2024. WECAFC was represented by its former first Vice-Chair.
- Regional Workshop for Caribbean SIDS on the BBNJ Agreement, Placencia, Belize, 7–10 October 2024.
- Regional Workshop for Latin America on the BBNJ Agreement, Santiago, Chile, 14–18 October 2024.
- Joint CRFM - UN DOALOS Webinar on Leveraging the UN Fish Stocks Agreement for Sustainable Fisheries Management in the Caribbean region, 28 October 2024.
- 77th GCFI Conference, Gosier, Guadeloupe, 4–8 November 2024.
- Ninth (hybrid) session of the Fisheries and Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS) Technical Working Group - Supporting FAO SOFIA State of Stocks Index (SoSI) biennial updates, 10-13 December 2024, Rome, Italy.
- Caribbean Regional BBNJ Conference, 30 January 2025.
- Honiara Summit on the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14.4, held in Honiara, Solomon Islands, 24–27 February 2025. The Secretariat advocated for and received funding support from Sasakawa Peace Foundation for two in-person attendants. Unfortunately, only the Secretary could finally participate, attending among others, bilateral talks and networking, the Regional Fishery Body Secretariats' network (RSN) meeting and was a panelist in the Side event on *SIDS and Fisheries sustainability*. For further information, please access the following link of [outcomes communiqué](#), foreseen to be presented at the Third UN Ocean Conference in June in France.
- Periodic meetings of partners' governing or statutory bodies, to name just few: ICCAT, CRFM, Fisheries Interim Coordination Mechanism (WECAFC, OSPESCA, CRFM), the UN Decade Task Force for the Technical Advisory Committee under the IOC-UNESCO Regional Secretariat for IOCARIBE.

Since the last Plenary of the Commission (WECAFC19) several publications were disseminated, including through the GCFI-NetServ, while a couple of others are currently in the pipeline of the FAO Publications Workflow System. The following publications are of interest:

- Guide for improved monitoring of anchored fish aggregating device catches and improved assessment of anchored fish aggregating device impacts on stocks in the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) region. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd3822en>
- The Caribbean Regional Management Plan for the anchored fish aggregating device fishery. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd3830en>
- Report of the nineteenth session of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission, Bridgetown, Barbados and virtual session, 6–8 September 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd2922t>
- Action Plan for Safety, Social Protection and Decent Work in Fisheries and Aquaculture in the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) Region. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd3641en>
- Final report to the Caribbean Fishery Management Council on project, “Priority 1 to improve understanding of queen conch conversion factors by reanalyzing existing data”. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd2831en>
- Report of the fifth meeting of the WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations, Puerto Rico, United States of America, 14–15 March 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd1590en>
- Review of biological data, spatial distribution of the stocks and ecological connectivity between areas beyond national jurisdiction and the exclusive economic zones in the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission region. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9103en>
- Report of the fifth meeting of the WECAFC Working Group on Fisheries using Anchored (or Moored) Fish Aggregating Devices (aFADs), Roseau, Dominica and Virtual meeting, 17–19 April 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0033en>
- Report of the twelfth (virtual) session of the Scientific Advisory Group of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission, 19–20 June 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0797en>
- Report of the sixth meeting of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) Working Group on Queen conch, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 16 March 2023. <https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/meeting/41360>
- Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan: Focus on Nassau grouper and Mutton snapper. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0128t>

5. Conclusion

This intersessional period was engaging, especially for the Secretariat and the Executive Committee, as reported in the areas not under the aegis of the advisory bodies. The level of implementation of the 2023–2025 Programme of Work could be rated as fair, as it is consistent with the budgetary situation and the advisory bodies’ capacity. This state of the art undermines the ability of the Commission to achieve its objective of promoting the effective conservation, management and development of the living marine resources in its convention area. It calls for an urgent action in addressing on a sustainable basis the unfilled positions of the SAG and D-G, and the matter of accountability of results by WG conveners. A sound mechanism could be discussed at the Commission level for shared responsibility between members for financial contributions and in-kind participation to the ad hoc WGs and technical task forces. Specifically connected to the sharing of burden for the effective provision of scientific support, distributing the responsibility by group of member countries (CRFM, OSPESCA, other members), could be an appropriate option. But while expecting these critical issues to be tabled at the next plenary of the Commission, each member is encouraged to dedicate efforts towards a conducive solution for a Commission they expect to be and deliver.