

14th MEETING OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

7 to 12 September 2026, Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

SC14 - Obs 01

Deep Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project

Overview of activities 2022-2026 and next steps

Deep Sea Fisheries Project

14th Meeting of the Scientific Committee (SC14) of the South Pacific Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO)

5 – 12 September 2026

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Abstract

The FAO-implemented Deep-sea Fisheries (DSF) Project is part of the Common Oceans Program Phase II and aims to ensure that DSF in the ABNJ are managed under an ecosystem approach. The Project is delivered in collaboration with co-financing partners, including SPRFMO. The Project has been active since November 2022 and will be ending in May 2027.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of DSF Project activities from 2022-to present, outline next steps regarding a possible Common Oceans Program Phase III and highlight specific actions relevant for SPRFMO SC. The paper provides an overview of all activities relevant to SPRFMO that have taken place since the beginning of the Project, but most recent and relevant activities are highlighted in red font.

The SC is invited to support ongoing engagement with the DSF Project, and in particular to:

- 1) Nominate experts to engage in an online consultation on SPRFMO-specific guidance to improve catch reporting of deepwater sharks;
- 2) Consider relevant sectors in the SPRFMO area which may interact with deep-sea fisheries and any data gaps which may need to be addressed in the context of the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement;
- 3) Consider whether SPRFMO would benefit from defining how it is implementing EAFM, PA and CC implications, and the usefulness of the FAO EAFM-IMT tool to facilitate reflections;
- 4) Consider proposed ways to improve data and knowledge sharing on toothfish longline fisheries with CCAMLR, SEAFO and SIOFA;
- 5) Consider nominating additional experts to engage in the work with ICES on the assessment of data-limited stocks.

Background

The ‘Deep-sea Fisheries (DSF) under the Ecosystem Approach’ Project is one of five child projects of the Global-Environmental-Facility-funded Common Oceans Program Phase II (2022-2027). The DSF project is implemented by FAO and executed by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), in collaboration with co-financing partners, which include the seven regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) responsible for the management of deep-sea fisheries stocks in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ)¹, as well as other international and national organizations². The objective of the project is to ensure that deep sea fisheries in the areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) are managed under an ecosystem approach that maintains demersal fish stocks at levels capable of maximizing their sustainable yields and minimizing impacts on biodiversity, with a focus on data-limited stocks, deepwater sharks and vulnerable marine ecosystems. SPRFMO is one of the seven co-financing partner RFMOs of the project.

Project activities relevant to SPRFMO (2022-2026)

1. PUBLICATIONS AND ONLINE TOOLS

Review of the implementation of the DSF Guidelines

The DSF Project, in collaboration with a panel of experts, has reviewed the implementation of the International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas (DSF Guidelines) 15 years after its adoption. The review found that the DSF Guidelines has been primarily directed towards the protection of VMEs, resulting in a complete change in the way bottom fisheries are managed. RFMOs have adopted closures to protect areas known or likely to have VMEs, designated bottom fishing areas where bottom fishing has occurred and can continue to take place, required strict protocols to be followed if bottom fishing is planned outside of this area, and introduced “encounter protocols” to protect any newly identified VMEs. Less progress has been made on the sustainable management of many DSF stocks, however, with a generally low uptake of the recommended actions of the DSF Guidelines to adopt measures necessary to ensure their sustainability. In particular, the recommended adoption of fishery-specific, long-term management plans have not been implemented.

The document can be downloaded at:

<https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd0243en>

¹ General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), North Pacific Fisheries Commission (NPFC), South East Atlantic Fisheries Organization (SEAFO), Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA) and South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO)

² International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), Southern Indian Ocean Deepsea Fishers Association (SIODFA), International Coalition of Fisheries Association (ICFA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States of America

E-learning Course “Strengthening deep-sea fisheries management in areas beyond national jurisdiction”

The DSF Project has produced an introductory e-learning course on the management of DSF in the ABNJ to provide a free, easily accessible tool to support learning on this topic.

The e-learning course encompasses five comprehensive modules, including:

- An introduction to deep sea fisheries, their biological characteristics, current status of stocks, and challenges in their management in the ABNJ.
- An overview of the international policy and legal framework for the management of DSF.
- The role of RFMOs in the management of DSF, explaining the process of their creation, structure, functions, and mandates in the management of DSF in the ABNJ.
- National-level policy and legal considerations, describing key measures included in national policy and legal framework for the sustainable management of DSF and enumerating the steps necessary to establish effective policy and legal framework at a national level.
- The role of monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) and enforcement mechanisms to achieve conservation and sustainable use of deep-sea fisheries.

The course takes approximately 2.5 hours to complete, and upon the subsequent completion of a short, knowledge-based exam, participants receive a certificate of competency.

The free, online course can be accessed at: <https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=1117>

Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum (DGroups community)

The DSF Project has established an online community, the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum, hosted on the DGroups knowledge-sharing platform, as a mechanism to facilitate ongoing collaboration, information exchange and discussion among project partners and the wider deep-sea fisheries community. The platform provides a simple, non-commercial and privacy-respecting environment for sharing DSF-related resources and engaging in technical and governance discussions relevant to the Project.

Key functions of the platform include a shared library for documents and knowledge products, a calendar of upcoming meetings and events, and moderated, email-based exchanges to support information sharing and discussion. Once registered, participants can communicate directly with group members via email without needing to access the platform website.

The Technical Forum represents a valuable resource for SPRFMO Members and delegates, providing access to DSF Project outputs, announcements of relevant events and opportunities for cross-RFMO dialogue. SIOFA delegates are encouraged to join the platform and contribute to ongoing knowledge-sharing activities: [Dgroups - Login](#)

2. WORKSHOPS AND SYMPOSIA

Workshop on the Application of the Precautionary Approach to the Management of DSF stocks

The DSF Project convened a virtual workshop to take stock of the application of the precautionary approach (PA) to the management of DSF stocks, and to explore the steps necessary to advance on the development of PA frameworks and/or long-term management plans/harvest strategies for these stocks.

The workshop took place virtually on 15 October 2024, and it was conducted through two identical sessions to accommodate different time zones. There was a total of 87 participants across the two sessions. All partner RFMOs and their Secretariats, as well as the academic, non-governmental and private sector community were represented at the workshop. NAFO contributed to the workshop by presenting its new PA framework, as an example.

Based on the outcomes of this workshop, the drafting of a publication is now underway, which will compile good practices in the application of the precautionary approach to the management of deep-sea stocks, as well as to reducing ecosystem impacts, and collate some recommendations for further guidance. RFMO partners were contacted to submit their good practice examples, and select experts, including from SPRFMO, were contacted to review a draft of the document.

More information available on the [Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum](#).

Symposium on Applying the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management in ABNJ

The DSF Project, in collaboration with NAFO and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), organized a Symposium on the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM), held from 11 - 13 March 2025 at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.

The Symposium focused on the implementation of the ecological components of EAFM, including retained species, non-retained (discarded) species, and ecosystem considerations. The Symposium was webcast, with interpretation provided in French and Spanish. The agenda, presentations, and recordings of the Symposium can be viewed at: <https://eafm-symposium.nafo.int/>.

Workshops with the DSF industry

Throughout 2024-2026, the DSF Project has held three workshops with DSF industry operators from across the globe to explore proactive contributions from industry to sustainable DSF. The workshops aimed to: (i) allow an open exchange between the DSF Project and deep-sea fishing operators on key technical topics, (ii) provide a platform for industry experts to exchange insights, address challenges, and propose proactive solutions for sustainable deep-sea fisheries management, and (iii) advance discussions on terms of reference for a potential industry network for sustainable deep-sea fisheries. Industry operators that are active in SPRFMO also took part in the workshops and have been actively engaged in this process.

Workshop on deepwater sharks and follow-up work

The DSF Project held a global workshop on deepwater sharks in July 2025 with the aim to improve catch reporting of deepwater sharks in the ABNJ.

The key outcomes of the workshop included the development of a workplan for:

- Reviewing FAO FishStat capture-production data on deepwater sharks
- Developing a global ecological risk assessment for deepwater sharks
- Developing guidance for the use of ASFIS codes for RFMOs
- Exploring of opportunities for industry engagement in data collection plan
- Developing identification materials for deepwater sharks
- Preparing an FAO Technical Report on the outcomes and the actions arising from the workshop

During the workshop there was a recognition that attempting to improve fisheries catch data collection for all species of deepwater sharks simultaneously presents a seemingly insurmountable task. A key output of the workshop was, therefore, the selection of a representative group of 15 deepwater shark, ray and chimaera species to use as a model for developing guidance for RFMOs on improved catch reporting practices, including the most appropriate use of FAO 3-alpha codes.

Since this workshop, the DSF project has progressed on a global ecological risk assessment, and the development of relevant guidance, and is now planning to:

- Conduct consultations with RFMO representatives, deepwater shark experts and the industry to ensure the final guidance developed is useful, practical and fit-for-purpose,
- Offer training in the implementation of the guidance, to facilitate improved reporting on the selected species within existing national and regional reporting frameworks.

More information available on our [Common Oceans website](#), and in the [Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum](#).

Workshop on cross-sectoral interactions with deep-sea fisheries

The DSF Project organized a workshop on cross-sectoral cooperation in the ABNJ on 24-26 September 2025 at FAO HQ, which explored the interactions between deep-sea fisheries and two other sectors in the ABNJ, the biodiversity conservation and deep-sea mining sectors. The Project supported the in-person attendance of the SPRFMO Executive Secretary.

The workshop explored:

- the nature of cross-sectoral interactions from the perspective of deep-sea fisheries,
- the science/methodology required to assess the potential impacts resulting from these interactions,
- the institutional actors, interactions and processes involved and needed to address these impacts effectively and efficiently, and
- the types and levels of cross-sectoral cooperation mechanisms required to prevent, manage and mitigate these impacts

The workshop:

- Underlined that cross-sectoral interactions in ABNJ can be characterized as complex, underexplored and often constrained by fragmented governance frameworks, data gaps and limited institutional capacity;
- BBNJ Agreement represents a critical opportunity to address these challenges;
- Timely consultation with affected RFMOs, alignment with RFMO scientific and decision-making cycles, access to fisheries and socio-economic data, and clarity regarding monitoring responsibilities were identified as critical prerequisites for constructive cross-sectoral cooperation.

The report of the workshop is under preparation and should be available by end 2026.

More information available on our [Common Oceans website](#), and in the [Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum](#).

Online workshop on climate change

The DSF Project has supported consultancies for NAFO, NEACF, NPFC, and SPRFMO to examine the uptake of climate change considerations by the scientific committees (SC). The reports of these consultancies have now all been completed and submitted to the relevant SC.

The Project then held an online workshop on 14 October 2025, to take stock of the results of the consultancies with the aim to present the common conclusions and recommendations, as well as to identify any next steps required.

All four consultancies agreed that there will be physical and chemical changes in the oceans, and that the consequence of this for RFMOs is that scientific committees may need to receive increased human and financial resources to be able to address these changes. Actions will include predicting the likely changes in fish distributions and the impacts of these on the wider food web and ecosystem, identifying species of high risk to climate change and ultimately, producing “climate-informed” management advice.

Meanwhile, management committees will need to demonstrate their clear commitment to climate change adaptation and response. This will mean considering the adoption of a climate-change response roadmap, which outlines tactical immediate actions and more strategic, longer-term actions.

Looking forward, workshop participants highlighted the need for capacity building for RFMO decision makers, improved communication among scientists and managers, and guidance for the development of RFMO climate change roadmaps in order to progress with the implementation of their climate change resolutions. They reiterated the incredible value of cross-RFMO dialogue to share challenges and brainstorm solutions.

Workshop on developing guidance on the implementation of EAFM for deep-sea RFMOs

The DSF Project held a workshop at FAO HQ, Rome, Italy from 15-16 June 2026 on “Developing guidance for improved implementation of the ecosystem approach to fisheries management

(EAFM), the precautionary approach and climate change considerations by deep-sea RFMOs”. The workshop specifically targeted RFMO managers/decision makers. The Executive Secretary of SPRFMO joined parts of the workshop virtually.

The workshop concluded that:

- All RFMOs base their work on their Convention texts and have regard to the relevant international instruments;
- All RFMOs have their processes for engaging with stakeholders;
- EAFM is a process not a destination;
- RFMOs are already implementing EAFM;
- RFMO measures need to be practical and implementable;
- Nevertheless, RFMOs would each benefit from defining how they individually implement EAFM, PA and CC implications as this would facilitate their ability to communicate on their achievements and contributions to global goals;
- An iterative process to develop RFMO-specific actions could be to take stock of what is already being done, assess whether measures and other actions are still fit for purpose considering best available knowledge, and identify additional/potential areas of improvement and/or actions that would help continue the process of implementation;
- The EAFM Implementation Monitoring Tool developed by the FAO EAF Nansen Programme³, adapted to and used within the specific context of the individual RFMO, could be helpful in informing internal RFMO conversations and reflections;
- The process outlined above is the responsibility of managers (i.e. Commission members), and a dedicated scientist-manager working group would be helpful to support the process.
- The process can be documented in a form that suits the individual RFMO, including a roadmap, a flow diagram, a list, a spreadsheet, etc...

The report of the workshop is in the process of publication and should be available by end 2026.

Workshop on RFMO communication and outreach

The DSF Project held a workshop at FAO HQ, Rome, Italy from 17-19 June 2026 on “Strengthening fisheries communications, engagement and outreach, in relation to the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity in the ABNJ”. This workshop aimed to take stock of current communications and outreach initiatives of RFMOs that manage deep-sea fisheries (deep-sea RFMOs) and identify ways to build on and diversify these initiatives to ensure deep-sea RFMOs’ contributions to sustainable use of fisheries resources and biodiversity conservation are better recognized. The Project supported the travel of SPRFMO’s Coordination and Communications Officer.

The simplest of steps the workshop identified that deep-sea RFMOs could take to broaden their communications and outreach initiatives is to tailor their websites to a broader audience, including featuring some news and updates in simple language, when possible and relevant. Other key take-aways from the workshop will be included in the workshop report, which should be made available to RFMOs by end July 2026.

³ <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3669en>

Online workshop on data and knowledge sharing in toothfish longline fisheries

An online workshop on data and knowledge sharing in toothfish longline fisheries was held on 4 & 6 August 2026, organized by the DSF Project. The workshop brought together relevant experts from Contracting Parties and industry representatives of SEAFO, SIOFA, SPRFMO and CCAMLR. The workshop aimed to provide a forum for shared understanding of the different toothfish fisheries and their management approaches, and to promote opportunities for:

- (i) data sharing to improve availability and interpretation of information required for the management processes implemented by each organization,
- (ii) sharing insights and experiences of successful management approaches,
- (iii) considering harmonized requirements to provide operational consistency for vessels that fish for toothfish under different management arrangements.

A report of the workshop will be drafted by end August 2026 and shared through official channels with all participating organizations. For SPRFMO, the report will be submitted to the Exploratory Toothfish Fisheries Workshop, to be held on 6 September 2026, ahead of SC14.

3. OTHER INITIATIVES

Data-limited stock assessments

The DSF Project has been engaging with ICES on supporting and improving data-limited stock assessments - bringing assessment scientists together to discuss their assessments with like-minded experts from other areas, and to learn and develop or revise methods together. The work plan involves four workshops: WKLIFE XIV which took place in the Azores from 1-5 September 2025; a first workshop on developing methodologies, which took place in Tokyo from 20-24 April 2026; a second workshop to test methodologies, which will take place in Copenhagen from 28 September to 2 October 2026, and the WKLIFE XV meeting in Copenhagen (7-11 September 2026).

Presentations at WKLIFE XIV included toothfish assessments in SEAFO, SIOFA, SPRFMO and CCAMLR by Takehiro Okuda and Roberto Sarralde. The report of the meeting can be viewed at: <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.30464690>

The first workshop aimed to further develop assessment tools applicable to deep-sea fisheries, with relevance to Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and advisory needs. The report of this workshop can be viewed at: <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.32253684>

The outputs of this collective work will be collated in an online, open-access digital platform hosted by ICES, which will provide accessible, transparent, and up-to-date tools and information that describe assessment methods with a focus on data-limited stocks.

Mapping of deep-sea fisheries in the ABNJ

Although there are a range of data products that provide global overviews of fishing effort, there is no global overview that provides a consistent view of the spatial extent (distribution) and intensity

(effort) of the use of fishing gears likely to come into contact with the seafloor in the ABNJ. Individual RFMOs provide spatial data on “fishery footprints” that reflect areas in which bottom fishing has taken place, however, these do not provide a contemporary view of fishing effort taking place in those areas. The DSF Project has been working with RFMO partners to source fishing effort data for fisheries using bottom contact gears to develop a global map of bottom fishing effort. All RFMOs, including SPRFMO, have provided the requested data and we are very grateful to the SPRFMO Secretariat and Contracting Parties for their open collaboration on this matter. The plan is to publish the consolidated maps, in preferably both 2D and 3D formats, by the end of 2026.

Towards a possible Common Oceans Phase III

Based on the successes of the Common Oceans Program Phases I and II, FAO and its partners are assessing the possibility to seek funding for a third phase of the Program under the 9th replenishment cycle of the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Development of the proposal is still at its very preliminary stages, and timelines are currently still uncertain. Nevertheless, expressions of support for a third phase, including national level endorsement letters, are welcome. Please contact Eszter Hidas, Project Manager of the Deep-sea Fisheries Project for further information (eszter.hidas at fao.org).

Requests for support / engagement from SPRFMO SC

The SC is invited to support ongoing engagement with the DSF Project, and in particular to:

- 1) Nominate experts to engage in an online consultation on SPRFMO-specific guidance to improve catch reporting of deepwater sharks;
- 2) Consider relevant sectors in the SPRFMO area which may interact with deep-sea fisheries and any data gaps which may need to be addressed in the context of the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement;
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