



11TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SPRFMO COMMISSION

Manta, Ecuador, 13 to 17 February 2023

COMM 11 – Report ANNEX 9e

High Seas Fisheries Group's statement on Bottom Fishing

Dear Members, ladies and gentlemen

I know many of you, and a large number of you have seen the HSFG provide papers over the last decade with advice from the coalface. It is commercial fishing vessels in their normal operations that gather the valuable data that informs this forum.

I do hope some of you have had the time to read our paper as we feel strongly that our points are valid and will withstand scrutiny. We have increasing interest in membership from other countries and we will inform the secretariat as new members join.

RFMOs and members' decisions directly and indirectly affect thousands of people and jobs in the fishing and associated industries, both within the EEZ and on the high seas. We believe members appreciate and consider this significant consequence of reducing TACs.

We regard sustainable fishing as not only a privilege, but a right under international and domestic law. This position is supported by the fish stocks agreement and UNCLOS, and furthermore most RFMOs, including SPRFMO, reflect this through use of words such as Rational use, sustainable use, economic use, and cultural use; terms that are recognised across all forums.

Fishing produces food, a tangible commodity, and with a growing world population food security is increasingly needed.

On the other hand, there are groups who want to undermine commercial fishing. These groups are well coordinated, resourced, and well-funded with lawyers, scientists, and lobbyists, who themselves are well paid from donations gained by selling nothing but a story. This story is often framed in a way to convince the public at large that commercial fishing is causing a huge problem, when in fact a lot is misinformation and distortions of the facts. These groups have people who spend all of their time committed to obtaining funding to damage or end bottom fishing as we know it.

We have highlighted a large and growing imbalance in the SPRFMO approach to managing the impact of bottom fisheries on VMEs. SPRFMO has implemented major spatial fishing closures to bottom fisheries without a clear scientific rationale, and while critical definitional questions remain unresolved, recent closures and measures have not been scientifically consistent with prior Scientific Committee advice or international precedent.

Now, some members are pushing to close even more of the SPRFMO area to bottom fishing, using a brand new scientific approach that doesn't even refer to a VME impact assessment or an estimate of VME status. This new approach is not legally consistent with international requirements under UNGA and the FAO, or with practices in other RFMOs, and it is in clear breach of the requirements of the Bottom Fisheries Impact Assessment Standard that SPRFMO adopted 2019.

We argue that until a defensible impact assessment framework is back in place and the Bottom Fisheries Impact Assessment has been updated, no further changes to CMM-03 should be adopted in relation to move on rules, encounter protocols, additional spatial fishery closures and especially the proposed 50 % reduction in quota. The current rules have forced some vessels out of the fishery, resulting in significant numbers of job losses, something that will only increase if SPRFMO continues this trend SC 10 report recognised this. The New Zealand proposal before members now will, if approved, end bottom fishing on the high seas for NZ.



We are asking members to maintain the status quo for 2 years while the actions proposed in our papers is carried out. The fishing effort is so low (one vessel last year) it cannot possibly impact the stock. While the global pandemic and high fuel prices can be blamed for some of the low catch effort over the last two years, the most significant cause can be attributed to a ‘pandemic of over precaution’.

Finally, we caution that if this precedent is established in SPRFMO – closing a fishery by claiming environmental impacts without even doing an impact assessment to quantify those impacts – then all high seas fisheries could face the same fate.

Thank you