



End Consensus Decision-Making: A Call for Fundamental Reform at WCPFC21

Steven Adolf, Senior Advisor for Accountability.Fish

The annual regular session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), held this month in Suva, Fiji, underscored an urgent truth: the consensus-based decision-making model of Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) like the WCPFC is no longer fit for purpose. This model, once suitable for simpler fisheries governance, now stands as a major obstacle to effective, transparent, and inclusive management of our oceans and fisheries.

As the world prepares for the implementation of the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ Agreement), the WCPFC's reliance on consensus threatens to paralyze its ability to act on urgent conservation and management issues. This year's session, which convened in a sprawling sports arena, highlighted this dysfunction. While there were some notable actions, what truly caught the attention of observers were the critical policy and management decisions that were delayed, diluted, or outright obstructed by a small group of self-interested states.

Take, for example, a management measure aimed at improving working conditions for crew members aboard tuna fishing vessels. As the first RFMO to address labor regulations, the WCPFC *could* have set a precedent. Instead, the measure was watered down after a decade of deliberation and won't take effect until 2028. Key stakeholders, including NGOs and workers' organizations, were left deeply disappointed by the minimal progress made. The concessions were the price of securing consensus, particularly from nations like China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, whose distant-water fleets dominate Pacific longliner fishing and have well-documented issues with labor abuses.

This year's session also saw stalled measures on other critical issues. Proposals to regulate transshipment activities, improve transparency, and combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing were blocked, leaving loopholes that perpetuate high-seas exploitation. Similarly, efforts to introduce Electronic Monitoring for longliner fleets—necessary to address the disparity in observer coverage—were diluted to the point of ineffectiveness. Even well-supported measures to prevent bycatch of endangered species, such as albatross populations and sharks, were torpedoed by consensus-blocking states.

The High Seas Treaty, along with other global developments such as seabed mining regulation by the International Seabed Authority, places additional pressure on RFMOs to adopt broader ocean conservation efforts. But for WCPFC to remain credible in this evolving landscape, it must reform its governance structures. This includes ending the



consensus trap, opening meetings to a wider range of observers and press, incorporating diverse stakeholder voices, and ensuring greater transparency and accountability in decision-making.

Ending consensus-based decision-making will be no easy feat. It demands unprecedented political will and courage from member governments. But failing to act risks further undermining the WCPFC's credibility and effectiveness. It's high time for a structural overhaul of RFMOs, starting with the abandonment of consensus as a default mechanism for decision-making.

Without this reform, the WCPFC and other RFMOs risk irrelevance in a world that increasingly demands bold, cooperative action to manage and protect our oceans. The time to act is now.

About Accountability.Fish

Accountability.Fish is an international non-governmental organization focused on enhancing transparency, accountability, and public participation in the governance of the world's fisheries. Through its advocacy and outreach efforts, the organization seeks to ensure that decision-making processes in fisheries management bodies remain open and inclusive.

It is funded by the Oceans Five Foundation.

For more information, please contact:

Edna Ayme-Yahil

Media Lead

edna@accountability.fish

www.accountability.fish