



Fishery Improvement Projects

What is a Fishery Improvement Project (FIP)?

A FIP is an alliance of stakeholders – retailers, processors, producers, and/or catchers – that comes together to resolve problems within a specific fishery or improve some specific aspect of the fishery that requires attention. The FIP works through key organizations and individuals, talking through the management of the fishery and the challenges that it may face, identifying data that needs to be collected, agreeing on a set of priority actions that should be undertaken to improve the fishery, and then overseeing an action plan.

The organization of the FIP can vary depending on the circumstances. It's possible for the FIP to have a completely separate identity, employ a secretariat and develop established funding arrangements. Alternatively, it might be relatively "light touch" in terms of administration and simply rely on regular meetings of key participants with a coordination role played by one of the members. All fisheries are different, and consequently it's necessary to create a FIP that suits the needs of the fishery, as well as the local culture where the fishery is located.

Since its inception, SFP has built a portfolio of demonstration FIPs across the globe that have generated useful information around the processes and tools required for carrying out successful FIPs. SFP is now moving away from an active role in individual FIPs to providing guidance, advice, and tools to anyone interested in implementing improvement projects.

How does a FIP work?

Although FIPs can vary a lot in terms of size and structure, they all need to carry out certain tasks if they are to succeed:

Formation of the FIP – A FIP is generally formed through the enthusiasm and interest of a number of players within the supply chain that have a stake in a particular fishery, such as catchers, processors, retailers, regulators, and scientists. Once an initial core group has formed it will typically reach out to other key players and invite them to participate. The administrative arrangements for a FIP are highly flexible and reflect local conditions. In FIPs where international supply chain and retailer engagement is sought, SFP can assist in connecting local FIP participants to interested international buyers.

Data assessment – Data assessment is a process whereby all of the current fishery data is located and brought together. The process has two key outcomes – early indications of

potential challenges to the fishery and identification of missing data required to create an effective management plan in the future.

Fishery assessment – The fishery assessment is aimed at identifying the challenges that face a particular fishery. One of the first challenges might be generating the data required to actually create a meaningful assessment. The assessment process (assuming adequate data is available) will characterize the state of the fishery and identify the specific issues that need to be addressed. Sometimes the fishery assessment might be part of a pre-assessment for Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) or other certification, but this is not always appropriate or desirable.

Agreement of a work plan – After the assessment has been completed, the FIP must examine the challenges identified by the report and agree a work plan for achieving improvements in the future. Such improvements might include the generation of data on stocks and landings, better administrative arrangements for managing the fishery, the use of modified gear types, the creation and enforcement of catch limits, and so on. One of the key functions of the work plan is to set clear priorities for tasks and assign responsibilities to those who will carry them out.

Creation of a monitoring procedure – In parallel to creating a work plan, it is essential that the FIP establish a monitoring system to ensure that activity can be effectively measured and reported on. Such a system will rely on the use of indicators for each element of the work plan with clear timetables and a mechanism for formally reporting progress to every member of the FIP via written reports and regular meetings. This procedure is extremely important to the successful functioning of the FIP (and is crucial if the FIP is required to report to external funders).

Implementation – After creating a work plan and monitoring system, the FIP will then function according to a routine agreed by members – typically including meetings of the FIP and any specialist sub-groups (such as those addressing fundraising or technical issues). FIP members will – carry out work plan activities, review progress, and provide regular reports. Ordinarily, a FIP will conduct an annual assessment of progress to date (or more frequently if required by major buyers, funders, or other interested parties).

Evaluating FIP progress

In order to show whether FIP improvement efforts are producing actual results, SFP has developed a “FIP Improvement Tracker,” which groups these common FIP tasks into a series of progressive steps or stages. For each stage, there are specific indicators.

Stage 1 – FIP is launched: The fishery has been evaluated, improvement options are identified, and supply chain engaged, with this information publicly available.

Stage 2 – FIP is formed: The stakeholders have met and formed either a formal partnership or informal alliance, and developed a work plan for improvements on which they all agree.

Stage 3 – Encouraging improvements: The work plan is made public. FIP members are pressing regulators for improvements and adopting better product specifications and procurement policies.

Stage 4 – Delivering improvements in policies and/or fishing practices: There have been improvements in government policy or fishery management, better compliance with the existing management plan, or improvements in fishing practices.

Stage 5 – Delivering improvements in the water: There have been positive trends in key scientific indicators (biomass, fishing mortality, bycatch, and unacceptable habitat impacts).

Stage 6 – Fishery is MSC certified (OPTIONAL): Achieving MSC certification is desirable but not absolutely a requirement for a FIP. There are, of course, definite benefits of MSC certification, such as having an independent third party verify the results of a FIP.

The FIP stages and their indicators are summarized in the diagram below. For a detailed explanation of how these indicators are used to assess FIP stages, please go to www.fishsource.com where the improvement trackers are listed for individual fisheries.

It is worth emphasizing that the improvement tracker is solely concerned with measuring progress and does not define how much progress is “enough.” Defining the level of progress and associated timetable that can be considered acceptable is a judgement for the FIP participants and other stakeholders.

Additionally, it is important to note that while the FIP stages normally occur in numerical order it is not obligatory. For example, it may happen that suppliers are organized and engaging the fishery – Stage 2 – while the evaluation of the fishery and identification of the improvement options are not yet public. Or a supplier working in the very early stages of a FIP may already be making efforts to improve policies and fishing practices, which are normally expected later, at Stage 3. If they succeed, as is sometimes the case, then a FIP may achieve Stage 4 before other companies join the FIP or before a FIP is formally announced. In short, FIPs can be flexible in how they progress and should match their plans to local circumstances.

SFP advises FIPs to try to achieve Stage 4 results as early as possible since this would indicate that the FIP is generating real and measurable benefits.

Who can join a FIP?

The most effective members of a FIP are those organizations and individuals that have a financial stake in the fishery, specialist technical knowledge, or a regulatory duty; or can require certain practices through product specifications and procurement policies. We discourage including other interests such as campaigning NGOs or bodies that only have a marginal interest in the specific fishery, because they are unlikely to have the knowledge, focus, and influence required to achieve practical change in the conduct of the fishery.

FIP members are responsible for constantly searching for organizations that might be useful members and contribute to the institutional capacity and success of the FIP.

Timescales

The timescales for a FIP (and associated work plan) are highly variable and have to be agreed by the FIP members themselves. There are no set guidelines for how quickly FIP work plans are implemented, but it is recommended that FIPs should focus on short-term practical changes that are clearly achievable rather than long-term ambitions, which may remain far in the future.

End goal

FIPs do not end at a common, predetermined point – some may choose a form of certification, such as MSC, but others may adopt a different target. SFP supports all FIPs that deliver improvement but recommends that the ideal end goal should be a fishery that could score an unconditional pass with the MSC if a full assessment were to be conducted.

Funding

Operating FIPs inevitably involves financial costs, although these can vary widely between fisheries. Typical costs will relate to administration, research, and assessments. There is no fixed model for how to fund a FIP, but there are a number of options available including contributions from commercial organizations involved in the FIP and support from funding bodies interested in improving fisheries. The FIP itself is responsible for assessing potential costs and identifying possible funding sources.

A well-funded FIP will be able to move relatively rapidly, for instance in obtaining technical advice or installing new capacity, such as data management or vessel monitoring systems. However, even FIPs with limited funding should be able to make progress on select key challenges.

Communications and reporting

The communication of FIP activities to external audiences is an important part of FIP operations, but there are also constraints. Some parts of FIP discussions may touch on areas of commercial sensitivity, so there is no value in making all FIP proceedings completely transparent. On the other hand, it is extremely important to explain what the FIP is and what it is doing to a wide range of audiences; and regular publication of information about FIP progress against the work plan should be considered a core function of the group. This information needs to be made available publicly (e.g., on a FIP participant's website).

Public claims

It is entirely appropriate that FIP members may wish to make public claims regarding their activities. However, it is important to be rigorous about assessing when such claims might be valid and enjoy external support. SFP and WWF have led an effort to define FIPs and

recently the Conservation Alliance (an umbrella group of NGOs in North America) agreed the *Guidelines for Supporting Fishery Improvement Projects*, which defines how the majority of the US seafood NGO community will recognize FIP activity.

The *Guidelines* document distinguishes between FIPs that are “moving toward sustainability” and those that are not. It states that FIPs that are “moving toward sustainability” should have, among other things:

- a scoping document completed by a third party experienced with applying the MSC Fishery Assessment Methodology, and
- a work plan specifically designed to address deficiencies in the fishery to achieve a level of sustainability consistent with an unconditional pass of the Marine Stewardship Council standard.

A second type of FIP discussed in the *Guidelines* is one that does not have an MSC pre-assessment or comprehensive work plan. This type of FIP would still be publicly recognized, but claims that it is “moving toward sustainability” would not be supported by NGOs.

The most important aspect about public claims relating to FIPs is that they accurately reflect the actual amount of work being carried out and improvements being generated.

Conclusion

Fisheries Improvement Projects represent a way for stakeholders within a fishery to engage in dialogue and agree future actions with others that share a common interest in a productive marine eco-system. The organization of FIPs is highly flexible, but the key elements are common to all – the creation and use of reliable data, the rigorous identification of challenges and strict prioritization of tasks, along with comprehensive reporting.

Examples from among the many successful FIPs around the world can be found at:
<http://www.sustainablefish.org/fisheries-improvement>

If you would like to find out more about Fisheries Improvement Projects please contact Sustainable Fisheries Partnerships at info@sustainablefish.org.

Fishery Improvement Project Process – Stages & Indicators

