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Title:	Update on the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework
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Summary:

Effective biosecurity assists in safeguarding the aquatic environment, local food production, and access to export markets, all of which are needed to increase economic resilience and decrease dependence on food imports.

The Pacific Community (SPC) is facilitating development of aquatic biosecurity capacity through the Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity (the Framework).

Implementation of the Framework has been delayed by COVID and challenges involved in appointing of key personnel. Improved operating conditions now enable further progress to be made.

A mid-term review of the Framework was originally scheduled to occur in June 2022. This review will now be deferred until short to mid-term implementation milestones have been completed.

The Framework was discussed at the 5th SPC Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture held in October 2022. The meeting noted progress to-date and participants agreed on various actions moving forward.

Recommendations:

Members are invited to:

- a. *note that* the mid-term review of the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework will now progress, having been delayed by COVID-19, and
- b. *comment on* the structure of the Implementation Committee and nominate representatives.

The importance of aquatic biosecurity

1. The Pacific region has many geographical and cultural advantages that can assist in achieving sustainable fisheries and aquaculture development. Aquatic biosecurity is key to making best use of these advantages.
2. Aquatic biosecurity planning has potential to assist in:
 - a. maintaining the high health status of aquatic organisms produced in the Pacific islands region,
 - b. improving the productivity and sustainability of the aquaculture sector,
 - c. maintaining traditional cultural uses of aquatic resources by communities,
 - d. facilitating access to markets, and
 - e. protecting the diverse aquatic environments found within the Pacific Islands region.
3. Aquatic biosecurity planning is defined as the development of a set of standardised protocols and procedures designed to minimize biological risks to the aquatic environment. The aquatic environment includes freshwater, estuarine and marine ecosystems. Planning may consider activities affecting aquaculture, wild fisheries, or natural ecosystems.
4. Biological risks include pathogens and invasive pests. Aquatic pathogens are organisms that have potential to cause disease in aquatic plants, aquatic animals, or, in some cases, humans. Aquatic invasive pests are introduced non-indigenous species that may cause harm to the aquatic environment through negative impacts on native or farmed aquatic species.

The Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity

5. The [Regional Framework on Aquatic Biosecurity](#) (the Framework) was developed by the Aquaculture Section of SPC FAME, reviewed and endorsed by the 3rd Regional Technical Meeting for Coastal Fisheries and by SPC 12th Heads of Fisheries in 2020. It was then endorsed by the 1st Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting in August 2020. The Framework maintains four key objectives.
 - a. **Objective 1: Governance.** To harmonise, develop and promote enforcement of coherent national aquatic biosecurity policies, regulations, procedures, and practices.
 - b. **Objective 2: Practices.** To improve aquatic biosecurity practices and infrastructure at the national level.
 - c. **Objective 3: Transfer of aquatic species.** To ensure responsible use and control of aquatic species translocations and introductions in the context of aquaculture activities, through the development and implementation of standardised import risk management procedures.

- d. **Objective 4: Training and cooperation.** A coherent regional approach to capacity building, coordination and collaboration in aquatic health and biosecurity, with reference to diagnosis, surveillance, reporting, quarantine, border control and the prioritising of research and development activities.
6. The Framework also includes a regional workplan (pp. 8-11) that focusses on (i) aquatic animal health management and (ii) the safe translocation of aquatic species, with the specific objective of enhancing regional aquaculture production.
7. The Framework envisaged a six-year plan (2020-2025), key steps were to:
 - a. implement the workplan,
 - b. review progress against the workplan at the annual SPC RTMCFA,
 - c. assist Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) in sourcing specific funding for in-country implementation,
 - d. conduct a mid-term review in June 2022, and
 - e. prepare a 2025–2030 plan during 2025.

Third Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting RFMM3 outcomes on aquatic biosecurity

8. When the ongoing Regional Aquaculture Strategy was discussed at the [Third Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting](#) (RFMM3) on 25 August 2022, Ministers emphasised the need to consider aquatic biosecurity in future planning. This call by Ministers for increased capacity in aquatic biosecurity demonstrates willingness to progress with the workplan as a priority.
9. The Framework has now received broad support from PICT members but achieving stated objectives within the Framework requires ongoing political commitment by individual PICT governments and administrations.

Status of national aquatic biosecurity plans among SPC members

10. National aquatic biosecurity plans have been produced by six PICTs, however a number of these are in draft form or are scheduled for review.
11. Each of the existing plans provides a general overview of aquatic biosecurity for the relevant PICT and undertakes an analysis aimed at identifying biosecurity strengths, weaknesses, potential threats, and opportunities. They also outline agreed regulatory frameworks and identify key aquatic biosecurity stakeholders. An agreed workplan and implementation strategy, including monitoring and evaluation, are also included in each.
12. Statutory arrangements differ between PICTs in terms of legislative powers and responsibility, but livestock disease, invasive pests and biosecurity have traditionally been the responsibility of departments of primary industry, agriculture, or the environment. In contrast, aquatic species are normally the responsibility of fisheries authorities. Depending on the PICT

involved, legislative authorities may need to establish memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between relevant authorities documenting communication pathways and clearly outlining roles and responsibilities to ensure that appropriate biosecurity requirements are met.

13. A key task for SPC will be to work closely with those PICTs wishing to develop or review national aquatic biosecurity strategies. The first of these national reviews began in January 2023 with Samoa.
14. Due to a need for inclusion of biosecurity in other fisheries and aquaculture management plans, where possible, development and review of aquatic biosecurity plans will be undertaken in conjunction with review of these other plans.

Review of aquatic biosecurity legislation among PICTs

15. The SPC Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture Programme has been working on a comparative study reviewing national aquatic biosecurity laws and policies in PICTs against the Framework and applicable international standards, for example the Aquatic Animal Health Code of the World Organization for Animal Health. At least 12 PICTs already have a Biosecurity Act in place but in most cases there are no specific provisions in place to regulate aquatic biosecurity, which often requires interagency collaboration between the ministries in charge of agriculture, fisheries, environment and shipping.
16. The study provides an overview of national legislation on aquaculture and aquatic biosecurity in each country or territory, identifying competent authorities, aquaculture regulations, aquatic disease control measures, rules for the domestic transfer of aquatic organisms, as well as import and export standards for live aquatic organisms, including health certification and risk analysis. The legal study also includes a brief review of environmental and maritime legislation dealing with the unintended introduction aquatic organisms, the control of invasive species, and regulations on biofouling and ballast waters.

Next steps

17. COVID restrictions and the lack of a dedicated aquatic biosecurity specialist within SPC delayed the Framework work schedule during 2020 through to mid-2022. Now that COVID restrictions are easing and the aquatic biosecurity specialist role has been filled, it is timely to revisit the workplan and discuss a process for moving forward. As a first step, we need to determine what progress has been made by individual PICTs and evaluate future needs. The mid-term review is the most appropriate forum in which make this determination.
18. The Framework called for a mid-term review to be undertaken in 2022. Since progress to implement the Framework at both regional and national levels has been delayed, it is recommended that the mid-term review also be delayed until a project implementation committee can be established. It will be the role of this committee to coordinate any review and oversee the project until its term of completion.
19. It will also be the role of the implementation committee to determine how the mid-term review will be conducted and the level of detail required. Key issues that the review may

consider include: progress being made; whether the Framework remains relevant to PICT needs; identifying any new issues that should be considered; legislative challenges; and an assessment on whether sufficient resources are available to achieve the stated objectives.

Recommendations from RTMCFA5

20. At the 5th SPC Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA5) held in August 2022, SPC provided [Working Paper 4 'Implementation of the Regional framework on aquatic biosecurity and National Aquatic Biosecurity Plans'](#). This paper discussed SPC's role in facilitating the development of aquatic biosecurity capacity through the Framework with meeting participants asked to provide feedback on a series of questions.
21. The meeting noted progress made on the regional aquatic biosecurity to-date and agreed on the following actions:
 - a. Members be encouraged to review their national aquatic biosecurity plans to determine if they remain relevant or require updating, and to contribute to the mid-term review of the Framework.
 - b. SPC FAME be requested to assist members with establishing MOUs between competent authorities to enhance inter-agency cooperation relating to aquatic biosecurity.
 - c. It was agreed that a broader scope than just aquatic animal health management and safe translocation should be included in any the revised Framework.
 - d. Maintain support for SPC FAME's review of aquatic biosecurity legislation. Members have requested that the results of this review be included in the mid-term review of the Framework.
 - e. Members requested that SPC FAME provide support for the development of in-country/territory diagnostic capacity by reviewing the availability of diagnostic laboratories and how these could be incorporated into a regional aquatic diagnostic network.

Recommendations from RTMCFA5 meeting to Heads of Fisheries:

22. RTMCFA5 recommended that HoF:
 - a. **support** the mid-term review of the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework to broaden its scope beyond just aquatic animal health and translocation, and to include the findings of the SPC aquatic biosecurity legislation review.
 - b. **encourage** members to review their own aquatic biosecurity plans, in line with the Framework review process, with an emphasis on developing interagency collaboration and response agreements, where appropriate.
 - c. **support** the investigation of the availability of diagnostic laboratories and the determination of requirements for developing a network that can service the Pacific islands' region.

Recommendations for HoF15

23. It is recommended that HoF delegates:

- a. note that the mid-term review of the Regional Aquatic Biosecurity Framework will now progress, having been delayed by COVID-19, and
- b. comment on the structure of the Implementation Committee and nominate representatives.