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To Whom It May Concern:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) have been forced to shift from in-person to virtual decision-making. While virtual meetings posed a number of challenges and limited progress on key conservation and management measures within RFMOs in 2020, it is important that lessons learned during this difficult year inform the work of RFMOs moving into 2021.

Attached to this letter is a list of recommendations for effective and transparent decision making at RFMOs, drawn directly from our observations and experiences within a wide range of RFMOs in 2020. Pew urges RFMO Secretariats, Chairs, and Members to immediately implement these practices for virtual decision-making, in order to enable RFMOs to resume their responsibilities in 2021 and beyond. Adoption of these approaches would improve inclusivity and transparency of information and discussions, and also improve RFMOs' ability to reach agreement on pressing conservation issues and other important business, not only in the virtual setting but with the return to in-person meetings, as well.

Many of the recommendations here were presented by The Pew Charitable Trusts to the 34th meeting of the United Nation's Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in February 2021 and also draw from the virtual meeting recommendations endorsed by members of the NGO Tuna Forum.

We are looking forward to a productive year of RFMO meetings and encourage you to contact us if there are any ways in which Pew may be of assistance in implementing these practices.

Sincerely,

Amanda Nickson
Director, International Fisheries

Recommendations for Effective and Transparent Virtual Decision Making at RFMOs

Communicate meeting expectations early and clearly:

1. Commit to a virtual format at least eight (8) months prior to meeting date, to allow adequate time for Secretariat and members to select and test IT systems.
2. Publish clear procedures for conduct of virtual meetings, including small working groups, to improve clarity and predictability.
3. Circulate registration information and detailed agendas well in advance and update agendas as changes are made, to enable Members and stakeholders to prepare and engage efficiently and effectively.

Progress as much work as possible in advance of decision-making meetings:

1. Hold adequate intersessional virtual meetings, providing critical time for initial negotiation and policy development.
2. Produce pre-meeting discussion documents, securing ample member input into these and making them available to accredited observers in real time, to allow adequate time for information gathering and negotiations, and to identify potential challenges in advance of the annual meeting, in a transparent manner.
3. Use pre-recorded presentations to communicate scientific and/or background papers in advance of meetings, to make room on abbreviated meeting agendas for key negotiations.
4. Consider holding all scientific meetings virtually, including post-pandemic, to reduce Commission spending while reducing barriers to participation. Savings could be redirected to support development of management strategy evaluation (MSE) tools, as part of future shock-proofing, and other important scientific processes.

Create formats and processes more conducive to reaching consensus and fulfilling mandates:

1. Explore setting time zones for meetings based on where the majority of participants are located. When time zones are widely divergent, consider alternating between morning & evening schedules. Alternatively, consider information-sharing meetings that are repeated in different time zones to introduce specific issues and encourage dialogue among delegation prior to official meetings.
2. Focus virtual meeting agendas on pressing conservation measures, such as those with a new stock assessment and/or necessary to end overfishing or rebuild stocks, and on advancement of frameworks that will help to shock-proof management moving forward—such as electronic monitoring and management procedures.
3. Annotate virtual agendas with relevant supporting documents, proposals & recommendations, and clearly identify the decision/s that are needed on each item.
4. Discuss significant agenda items using shorter time blocks over successive days to provide space for bilaterals and member delegation discussions.
5. Make use of formal email groups or IT systems that increase opportunities for scheduling and hosting side discussions and breakout groups, as desired by meeting participants. And, explore whether the same IT platform can be used across multiple RFMOs to improve consistency/ease of use.
6. Set time limits for individual interventions.
7. Clarify the consequences for parties failing to reach consensus, and ensure they are sufficiently motivating to drive consensus. At a minimum, lack of consensus should not result in no management measure (e.g. an unregulated fishery) or a rollover of an existing measure that is not in line with the best available science.
8. Make available a near-real time record of interventions, including electronic recordings where possible, to increase transparency and ensure participants can track discussions and government positions and responses, particularly if they experience interruptions in their internet connections.

9. If allowed, organize several, shorter Commission meetings to address & take binding decisions on specific topics.

Empower the Chair to lead members through the meeting:

1. Support the Chair in maintaining agenda times and structure and updating agenda items and times in as close to real time as possible, to improve predictability and efficiency of all members' engagement.
2. Provide the Chair authority to submit draft text for consideration via a Chair's proposal to improve efficiency and maximize the likelihood of reaching consensus during shortened meetings.
3. Publish detailed meeting reports shortly after conclusion of each meeting and announce impactful decisions via public circulars or statements in order to promote transparency and ensure stakeholders and the public are aware of decisions.