Revealed: Industry-led West Africa Fishery Protection Measures Marred By 'Massive Conflicts of Interest'

Industry-led fishery protection measures in one of the world's most productive fishing areas are marred by a massive conflict of interest, new research finds.

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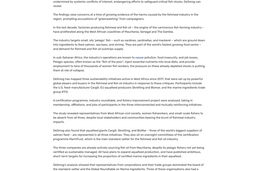

A cargo trawler fishing off the coast of Mauritania. Ward Vrolix, Unsplash Pierre Gleizes / Greenpeace

This investigation has been translated into French. You can read it on DeSmog here.

Flagship initiatives to ensure responsible sourcing for the global seafood market in West Africa are being undermined by systemic conflicts of interest, endangering efforts to safeguard critical fish stocks, fishing communities and crews.

The findings raise concerns at a time of growing evidence of the harms caused by the National Shrimp Committee (NSC) in Senegal and Mauritania, and by the Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) that it oversees.

In the last decade, the NSC has been promoting Marine and Fair Fish — the slogan of the fishery protection measures now positioned along the West African coastline of Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia.

Marine and Fair Fish promotes "fair trade" — such as guidance, certification, training and crew ground-down into ingredients to feed spectators, salesmen, and shrimp. They are part of the world's fastest growing food sector — and demand for fish is set to double by 2030.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the industry's operations are known to cause pollution, food insecurity, and piracy, and to exploit workers. Marine and Fair Fish promotes "responsible" fishing practices, and claims to be a "guarantee of the quality of the source of fish and the welfare of the people who make it possible to bring them on sale of whatever."

Marine and Fair Fish promotes sustainability initiatives aimed at West Africa since 2017. Key stakeholders in the fishery protection measures are the fishmeal and fish oil industry's response to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Fishery Improvement Project (FIP). Its leaders accounts for the fishmeal and fish oil industry, with which it shares a common address.

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sardinella in 2022.

Royal Canin has stated it will only source from the Mauritanian FIP when its "fish oil is MarinTrust certified".

Beginnings of Regulations

Mauritania has rules in place to protect key fish species and improve collection and sharing of data. But while fisheries advocates have welcomed better transparency, enforcement is limited.

Since 2021, for example, Mauritania has stipulated that 20 percent of all fish brought into a factory must be frozen and set aside for human consumption. This rule was meant to help address the drastic drop in small fish consumption, for example in Senegal where it has halved in 10 years. But an official at the government research institute IMROP informed DeSmog that the set-aside frozen fish is exported to Asia, Europe, and Morocco.

As early as 2016, the Mauritanian government set a quota for fishmeal factories to limit production using whole fresh fish to 2,000 tonnes of fishmeal per year, with the remainder made from byproducts. But this does not seem to have been upheld.

A study published in March 2024 said 95 percent of fishmeal and fish oil is made from whole fresh fish (consistent with previous reports). Yet Mauritanian exports increased sharply after 2016, and the average production recorded in 2017 by the five FIP partner factories averaged at 10,660 tonnes – more than five times higher than the limit.

The rule also stated that the factories must reduce fishmeal production by 15 percent each year until 2019. Instead, Mauritania's fishmeal and fish oil exports tripled between 2010 and 2020.

Since May 2021, round sardinella have been banned for use in fishmeal production in Mauritania, shifting the fishmeal fishing effort to sardines instead, which are not yet "fully exploited", by the FAO classification.

A MarinTrust report from 2021 confirms the fishmeal industry is using greatly reduced volumes of round sardinella – a fact confirmed to DeSmog by FIP representative and statistics head at IMROP, Cheikh-Baye Braham, who said now "fish meal is mainly produced from byproducts and sardines, which are not widely eaten locally".

But the same MarinTrust evaluation also "fails" the FIP controls relating to the composition of catches, and "landings declaration by species". Meanwhile, a 2023 evaluation of the fishery by SFP states that illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing of sardines in Mauritania "warrants concern". And despite the FIP and the government's regulations, round and flat sardinella are still classified as overexploited by the FAO, as of 2022.

"I can understand the rationale behind industry, who have capital, looking to support fisheries governance in West Africa, and the Mauritanian government, who want a sustainable fishery, engaging with them," says environmental social scientist Christina Hicks, professor at the political ecology group at Lancaster University.

"But fisheries management is always hard, particularly when fishing effort is driven by global market forces. It has taken 20 years of intensive fisheries management in nations with considerable resources and capacity to reverse stock declines."

Hicks was not convinced the measures in Mauritania were equal to the scale of the problem. "Neither the capacity for intensive fisheries management nor meaningful engagement seems to be in place, as fishing has continued after the stocks were declared as overexploited and key actors do not feel represented. The risk is they legitimise the continued overexploitation of this crucial stock," she said.

Sustainability Claims

Cheikh-Baye Braham from the Mauritanian FIP stressed to DeSmog that "regulation has been strengthened considerably in recent years".

He added: "Any factory who would like to join can become a FIP participant. The objective is to be inclusive. Anything the FIP does is by its very nature voluntary. Regulated sustainability is the role of the government of Mauritania."

The SFP told DeSmog that the presence of a FIP "indicates that various stakeholders have come together to fix issues in a fishery. It is not a claim of sustainability, and should not be described as such.

"All the members of the Mauritania FIP fully recognize problems in the fishery, which is identified as "poorly managed" in the most recent SFP report on reduction fisheries."

Yet the sustainability and sourcing policies of the world's biggest four aquafeed producers, Cargill, Skretting, BioMar, and Mowi, all state that they source from "certified fisheries, *or FIPs*".

A former factory employee in Mauritania told DeSmog: "All the factories in Mauritania are trying to get into the FIP to get access to the European markets."

Skretting told DeSmog in a statement: "Since our involvement in the small pelagics Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) we have continuously decreased our purchases from uncertified materials in Mauritania. From 2024, and in line with our Marine Ingredients Sourcing Policy, we will only purchase ingredients coming from the FIP." It added that it shares its sourcing at the Ocean Disclosure Project and in its annual Sustainability Report.

The MSC told DeSmog in a statement: "There are no MSC certified fisheries in West Africa and we are not involved in the Mauritania fishery improvement project (FIP)."

For Belhabib, the fishmeal industry is fundamentally unsustainable. "It's taking fish, a very good source of food, from the mouths of people in impoverished communities where the fish stocks are already not doing great. It's environmentally wasteful. It's not sustainable – it's unethical.

"Having representation from the small-scale communities of West Africa, the people whose livelihood depends on these fish, is absolutely necessary. We have to stop thinking about them as just stakeholders. And think about them as rightful owners of the resource."

The map was updated in August 2024 to include Biomar as a partner of the FIP.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Calculation methodology. 1) DeSmog took the reported volumes of fishmeal (FM) and fish oil (FO) produced in Mauritania in 2023 (FM = 71,370 t/ FO = 17,645t), which is equivalent to 350,000 tonnes of fresh fish, according to the 20:1 ratio of whole fresh fish required to make fish oil. 2) We took the *recommended* portion size of 100g of fish / person/ per day (= 36.5kg/ person/ yr)by EAT-Lancet, based on Hicks et al. 2019. 3) The upper limit of 9.6 million people assumes fish is eaten whole (100%). The lower limit of 6 million is a conservative estimate using the UN FAO's edible portion sizes (62%) 4).The final sum = 350,000,000 kilos fresh fish/ year/ divided by 36.5 kilos/ per capita consumption. This methodology follows that used by Feedback in its Blue Empire report.

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By **Brigitte Wear**, **Hazel Healy** and **Michaela Herrmann**

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