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IFFO, SFP roundtable focuses on West Africa, faces Greenpeace critique

Mark Godfrey published in [Environment & Sustainability](#)

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A new roundtable group has been formed by IFFO, the Marine Ingredients Organization, and the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership with the goal of improving data on fisheries in West Africa, with the ultimate aim of improving their sustainability.

Together with representatives of the “whole marine ingredients value chain,” IFFO and SFP have [convened the Global Marine Ingredients Roundtable in October](#) to “gather data, improve their understanding of the region, and drive changes where needed,” noted a joint statement from the IFFO and SFP to SeafoodSource.

Aquaculture and environment expert Kevin Fitzsimmons, a professor at the University of Arizona, salutes the IFFO for “making the correct efforts to



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work with SFP and the more interested West African nations,” but questioned whether there’s potential for regional fishmeal and fish oil production to grow from increased use of byproducts.

“The fisheries resources in those countries have been a mess for a long time; IUU, overfishing, mixed species fisheries taking juveniles, along with local corruption. It will be a difficult road but I certainly applaud the IFFO and SFP efforts,” he said. “My gut feeling is that some of the stated goals are illusionary; 50 percent of new fish meal and fish oil are likely to be from fish processing, of course. The wild fisheries are overfished now. So aquaculture and fish processing are the only other potential sources. And since most fish in local markets are not sold with any value adding, the amount of ‘new’ fishmeal is likely to be minimal.”

In a statement to SeafoodSource, IFFO and SFP said their focus on West African fisheries was well-warranted, pointing to an FAO prediction that as much as 50 percent of increases in fishmeal production over the next 10 years in Africa will come from fish byproducts.

“There may be scope to increase the total by applying systems and infrastructure to facilitate collection and use of byproducts,” it said.

“Byproduct utilization is an important way of extracting full value from fishery resources and it should be stimulated where possible.”

Initial conversations with roundtable members have focused on Mauritania and Morocco, assumed to be two of the biggest fishmeal and fish oil producers on the continent. Estimates put Morocco’s 2020 fishmeal production at 170,000 metric tons (MT) and its fish oil production at 30,000 MT. Morocco’s production based on whole fish is 55 percent, while 45 percent of its production comes from byproducts, according to IFFO. Estimates for Mauritania put its 2020 fishmeal production at 110,000 MT (compared to 70,000 MT in 2014) and its fish oil production at 39,000 MT. All but 10 percent of Mauritanian production is from whole fish.

The IFFO/SFP statement said tighter fishing regulation – such as a law change in Mauritania in 2020 directing all sardinella catches to human consumption, and fishery improvement projects (FIPs) for small pelagics launched in Morocco in 2014 and 2019 and in Mauritania in 2017 – as signs of improving sustainability metrics in the region. IFFO and SFP also pointed out that in Mauritania, “all fishmeal and fish oil products exported are produced from land-based factories, which are all E.U.-approved.”

“The fish supply of all these factories includes artisanal pirogues and industrial purse-seiners exclusively fishing in the Mauritania EEZ waters,” the organizations said. “This has incentivized factories to develop improved storage and processing facilities. This regulatory change highlights the importance of accurate catch-recording, with such data being central to effective enforcement of this type of legislation and activity.”

Elsewhere in Africa, the roundtable stands ready to offer support to Senegal and Gambia to compile better data, according to SFP and IFFO. Better data collection will help it prioritize markets for attention, they said.

“Significant volumes of small pelagic species are transformed into fishmeal and fish oil every year in the region. There’s no centralized collection of statistics in these countries. IFFO numbers are estimated based on feedback from producers and brokers/traders,” they said. “Questions have



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been raised about whether the current level of fishing for small pelagic species is undermining local food security for coastal communities that rely on seafood as their principal source of protein. The data needed to answer that question is not readily available and so the roundtable will strongly support efforts to achieve a better assessment of the situation.”

IFFO said its members are adamant that fish needed for food security in West Africa not enter the fishmeal or fish oil production chain.

“Where there may be knowledge gaps, the precautionary principle should be applied, and effective management should be implemented accordingly.”

Both industrial and artisanal fishing interests “must have a role in shaping management,” it said. Despite the opaque nature of the region’s supply chains, the Global Roundtable has stated it will work through existing international and regional frameworks, while also improving data collection “to better understand and address the food security and related socio-economic concerns that have been raised.” It also “intends to use its outreach to conduct social projects and gather additional funding to support and expand them in the long-term.”

But Fitzimmons is worried that the eagerness of Morocco and Mauritania, as Roundtable interlocutors, to increase exports of fishmeal and fish oil will put continued pressure on stocks.

“They are keen on exports, and diverting more catch to human consumption or leaving in the ocean for marine conservation purposes seems to be unlikely. So having the roundtable becoming a talking shop could mar the entire effort [towards greater sustainability],” he said.

Absent from the roundtable is any representative from China. None of the major Chinese producers operating fishmeal plants in Africa, such as Poly Hong Dong, [which operates a large fishing base in Mauritania](#), have yet expressed interest in joining, according to IFFO.

“The Global Roundtable relies on a coalition of stakeholders from the value chain willing to take action. This is a long-term process and companies are welcome to join over time either as members or as ad hoc participants for specific topics,” it said. “For now, no Chinese producer has joined but, the Global Roundtable will consult with relevant stakeholders in due time.”

Not having Chinese firms joining the roundtable leaves a large gap, according to Fitzimmons.

“My guess is that the Chinese companies prefer the current situation and resent anyone coming in imposing rules, quotas, and other encumbrances on the way the Chinese do business. However, as the [Communist] Party is trying to put on a better international face, they may get instructions from Beijing to operate more reasonably and begin to collaborate with other stakeholders.”





Chinese feed companies have been working hard to shift away from fishmeal, according to Ling Cao, associate professor at the school of oceanography at Shanghai Jiaotong University.

"In general, Chinese feed companies have been working hard to replace fishmeal with alternative ingredients and have made promising progress," Cao told SeafoodSource. "Fish-free feed for low-value species is already commercially available. But for high-value species, the market needs more time to scale up fish-free feed, mainly due to low acceptance by farmers and high cost and unstable supply of those high-quality alternative ingredients equivalent to fishmeal and fish oil."

In a statement to SeafoodSource, Greenpeace Africa, which [is in the midst of a campaign](#) urging West African nations to halt the manufacturing of aquafeed and animal feed that uses fish fit for human consumption, said absence of any Chinese firm in the new roundtable is "worrying, considering both that China is the main importer of fishmeal in the region [while the E.U. imports most of the fish oil]."

The environmental NGO said Mauritania nearly doubled its fishmeal exports to China in 2020. Last year, Mauritania hit a record for its fishmeal exports with a total of 128,670 MT, according to ITC Trademap, which is based on U.N. Comtrade data. The IFFO's members "already know their industry is unsustainable and impacting food security" in West Africa, Greenpeace Africa said.

"For years, scientific assessments have shown that small pelagic fish stocks in the region are overexploited, and local artisanal fishing associations have repeatedly rung the alarm about the various impacts that the [fishmeal and fish oil] industry is having on local fish resources, the coastal environment, jobs, and food security," it said.

In recent years, artisanal fish catches have plummeted and the price of fish for the region's consumers has rocketed, according to Greenpeace Africa, which [has published three reports on the issue](#) since 2019. The NGO said there is a "long way to go" before West Africa's fishmeal and fish oil industry is properly regulated and transparent, and that in the meantime, Greenpeace Africa said aquafeed companies "should simply stop sourcing from West Africa – Mauritania, Senegal, the Gambia – where the priority must be to rebuild small-pelagic fish stocks and redirect all catches towards human consumption."

"Using wild caught fish as animal and fish feed is unethical and unsustainable," it said. "These fish have always been an important and traditional source of food and the region is already subject to food insecurity. Thus, for international importers to use them is fundamentally wrong, and having a terrible socioeconomic impact in West Africa."

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