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Proposal to Amend the Regional Observer Programme Minimum Standard Data Fields and SciData to Support Sea Turtle Conservation and Management

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Submitted by the United States of America

At WCPFC20, the Commission recommended that SC20 and TCC20 review the current requirements under the Scientific Data to be provided to the Commission (SciData) to capture sea turtle interaction reporting requirements under the WCFPC Conservation and Management Measure for Sea Turtles (CMM 2018-04), paragraphs 5c and 7e (WCPFC20 Summary Report, Para 753e.). SC20 noted that some CCMs have different interpretations of the requirements, thereby limiting collection of valuable data regarding the nature of sea turtle interactions in WCPFC convention area.

At WCPFC21, the Commission agreed to review and revise CMM 2018-04 in 2026, to ensure that the reporting requirements are clearly defined and to consider expanding the scope of the measure for consideration by SC22, TCC22 and WCPFC23 (WCPFC21 Summary Report, Para. 204). At WCPFC22, the Commission endorsed the formation of an informal intersessional working group, led by the United States, to review CMM 2018-04 in 2026 and report back to SC22, TCC22, and WCPFC23 (WCPFC22 Provisional Meeting Outcomes,Para. 16).

The United States led a two-day Informal Intersessional Working Group to Review CMM 2018-04 in April 2026 (CMM 2018-04 Review Report). The outcomes of the review highlighted the need for further research to better understand the effectiveness of bycatch mitigation measures for sea turtles in deep-set longline fisheries, particularly for leatherback turtles. Accordingly, the United States does not intend to propose modifications to the existing sea turtle measure (CMM 2018-04) until the completion of an ongoing analysis using WCPFC Regional Observer Programme (ROP) data to further evaluate potential sea turtle mitigation strategies in deep-set longline fisheries. The results of this analysis are expected to be presented to SC23, at which time the United States may propose revisions to CMM 2018-04 for consideration by the Commission.

A key outcome of the review, however, was recognition that improved data on sea turtle interactions in longline fisheries are needed to strengthen our understanding of these interactions and to inform the development and refinement of effective management and mitigation strategies. In response to this identified need, the United States is proposing revisions to the current SciData requirements and the ROP Minimum Standard Data Fields (MSDF). These revisions are intended to improve the consistency, quality, and utility of sea turtle interaction data by: 1) clarifying existing reporting requirements; 2) collecting more detailed, interaction-level information on hook, bait, and other relevant gear characteristics; and 3) enhancing the information necessary to better characterize and estimate sea turtle bycatch. The proposed revisions also build upon previous discussions and recommendations in the WCPFC, including the following:

- SC21 reviewed proposed enhancements to the SciData standards for longline and purse seine fisheries to improve data quality, consistency, and conservation outcomes for sea

turtles. The proposed changes included clarifying catch reporting, ensuring operational data fields support identification of shallow-set fisheries, and strengthening the collection of key gear characteristics (e.g., hook type, hook size, and bait type). SC21 agreed that these issues should be considered as part of the intersessional review of CMM 2018-04 on sea turtles, led by the United States, with outcomes to be reported to SC22 and TCC22.

- In 2016, the WCPFC convened two ABNJ (Common Oceans) Tuna Project-funded workshops to evaluate the effectiveness of sea turtle mitigation measures in Pacific longline fisheries. The workshops concluded that standardized observer data collection protocols were essential for improving future analyses and recommended updates to the WCPFC Regional Observer Programme (ROP) Minimum Standard Data Fields (MSDF).
- The United States submitted a proposal to WCPFC15, WCPFC15-2018-DP07, which sought to improve observer data collection by strengthening the linkage between catch events and gear information and enhancing the recording of sea turtle interactions. While the proposal was not adopted due to concerns over additional observer workload, many of the proposed changes focused on clarifying instructions for information already being collected rather than creating new reporting requirements.

As the ongoing review of CMM 2018-04 has highlighted the need for improved data on sea turtle interactions, the United States considers this an appropriate and timely opportunity to revisit these previously proposed updates.

Based on the above mentioned discussions and outcomes, the United States is proposing the following revisions to the SciData (Annex I) and ROP MSDF (Annex II) in order to improve data on sea turtle interactions in the WCPFC:

Annex I: Proposed Revisions to the Scientific Data to be Provided to the Commission (SciData)

This proposal builds on recommendations previously put forward by the Scientific Services Provider and considered by SC21 (SC21-ST-WP-05). At that time, members agreed that the proposed enhancements should be considered within the broader context of the review of CMM 2018-04. Accordingly, SC21 agreed that these issues would be addressed through the intersessional review of CMM 2018-04 on sea turtles, led by the United States, with the outcomes to be reported to SC22 and TCC22.

During the Informal Intersessional Working Group reviewing CMM 2018-04, participants noted that the current requirement for annual SciData submissions has been interpreted inconsistently across CCMs, particularly with respect to whether data must be provided at the operational or summary level. Participants also agreed revisions to the current sea turtle

reporting requirements would improve understanding of bycatch patterns, and also emphasized the importance of reporting bait type.

The proposed revisions in Annex I are intended to ensure greater alignment between the reporting requirements outlined in CMM 2018-04 and the current SciData requirements, and to allow for more comprehensive data collection on sea turtle interactions in WCPFC fisheries.

Annex II: Proposed Amendments to the WCPFC Regional Observer Programme Minimum Standard Data Fields

The proposed revisions in Annex II largely reflect amendments previously proposed in WCPFC15-2018-DP07. Most changes provide greater clarity to existing data fields, while two additional fields are proposed: one to record hook type and hook size, bait type, and branch line material information that the sea turtle was caught on when a sea turtle interaction occurs, and another to record the type and amount of gear remaining upon release for all species of special interest. The first change would support data collection to comply with provision 7(a)(i) in CMM 2018-04. The latter would also support implementation of paragraph 22 of CMM 2025-06 and may provide useful information for future shark assessments. The proposal to collect data at the interaction level, rather than the set level, reflects the recognition that hook size and type may vary not only between trips, but also within individual sets, and that the use of mixed hook and bait types is common in some fisheries. These considerations were confirmed during discussions at SC21, where members noted that hook size and type can vary within both trips and sets, and that mixed bait types are frequently used (SC21 Summary Report, paragraphs 80–95).

We welcome feedback from TCC22 on the proposed changes included in **Annex I** and **Annex II**.

ANNEX I

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE SCIENTIFIC DATA TO BE PROVIDED TO THE COMMISSION

- Revise section 1.3 to add hook size and type (with standardized reporting options) to the longline gear characteristics to comply with provision 7(a)(i) in CMM 2018-04.
- Revise sections 1.3 and 1.5 in Annex 1 to capture interactions with sea turtles.
- Revise Annex 2 tables A2.1.3 and A2.2.4 to add footnotes to the text "and other species as determined by the Commission" in the SPECIES CODE reference text field and in the NOTES columns for the following fields:
    - CATCH NUMBER and CATCH WEIGHT fields to align with the requirements for reporting catches of sea turtles under CMM 2018-04 (table A2.1.3)
    - DISCARDED/RELEASED NUMBER field to align with the requirements for reporting catches of sea turtles under CMM 2018-04 (table A2.2.4)

ANNEX II

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE WCPFC REGIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAMME MINIMUM STANDARD DATA FIELDS

SPECIES OF SPECIAL INTEREST Marine Turtles~~Reptiles~~, Marine Mammals, Seab ~~B~~irds, certain~~Designated~~ Shark Species[1]			For Information only; not for inclusion in ROP MSDF
GENERAL INFORMATION		**#**	**Already Collected?**
Type of Interaction	Indicate what t~~T~~ype o~~O~~f i~~I~~nteraction, i~~I~~.~~E~~e. ~~C~~caught ~~O~~on ~~L~~line - ~~T~~tangled ~~I~~in ~~N~~net, ~~S~~swimming ~~A~~around ~~O~~outside ~~O~~ff ~~N~~net, ~~E~~etc., using the species interaction codes (G01-G06) and new codes for 'entangled in purse seine net (G07)' and 'entangled in FAD (G08)	154	Yes (text change only)
Date and Time of interaction	Record ~~S~~ship's ~~D~~date and ~~T~~time of ~~I~~interaction	155	Yes (text change only)
Latitude and Longitude of interaction	Record geographic ~~P~~position of the ~~I~~interaction.	156	Yes (text change only)
Species Code of Marine Turtle~~Reptile~~, Marine Mammal, or Seabird.	Use FAO codes for ~~S~~species.	158	Yes (text change only)
LANDED ON DECK			
Length of Species	Measure length in c~~C~~entimetres.	159	Yes (text change only)
Length Measurement code	Measure using the ~~M~~measuring~~e~~ ~~M~~method determined for that ~~S~~species.	160	Yes (text change only)
Sex~~Gender~~	Determine the ~~S~~sex and record using codes 'male', 'female', 'indeterminate' or 'unknown'~~the Animal if possible~~.	161	Yes (text change only)
Estimated Shark Fin Weight by species	Weigh each ~~S~~species' ~~S~~shark ~~F~~fins separately if shark has been finned by crew, if no scales estimate the weight.	162	Yes (text change only)
Estimated Shark Carcass Weight by species	Weigh each ~~C~~carcass of a finned shark, if no scales available or body is discarded, or if it is too large to handle; estimate the weight.	163	Yes (no change)
Condition when Landed on Deck	Record~~What is~~ the ~~C~~condition of the animals when caught ~~use~~using "Species Caught and Release Condition C~~-~~odes" (A0-A3, D and U)~~:~~	165	Yes (text change only)
Condition when Released	Record ~~What is~~ the ~~C~~condition of the	166	Yes (text change only)

[1] SC13 agreed that shark species of special interest include silky shark, oceanic whitetip shark, whale shark and all species of mantas and mobulid (devil rays) (SC13 Summary Report, para 134). WCPFC 14 adopted the SC's recommendation.

	animal when discarded ~~use~~using "Species Caught and Release Condition ~~c~~Codes" (A0-A3, D and U)~~;~~		
Tag Recovery information	Record as much as information as possible on any ~~T~~tags recovered	167	Yes (text change only)
Tag Release information	Record as much information as possible on any ~~T~~tags placed on the animal~~species~~ before being released.	168	Yes (text change only)
Hook, bait and material	For each sea turtle caught, record hook type and hook size using the PSC "Terminal Gear Identification Guide", the branch line material, and the bait (if known) that the animal was caught on.		Yes, but collected at the trip or set level, not at the hook level. (Hook type and size and bait type are collected at the set level. Branchline material is collected at the trip level.) **Information is required at the hook level because often several types (or "mixed") are recorded at the trip or set level and this severely limits analysis.** To reduce observer workload this data collection would be required for sea turtles only.
Gear remaining when released	If animals are released alive describe whether gear is left attached (yes/no). If yes, describe any gear that is left remaining.		Partially. Whether the hook and/or line is removed is required, but the type and length
INTERACTION WITH VESSEL OR GEAR ONLY			
Vessel's Activity during interaction	What was the vessel doing when the interaction took place i.e. setting, hauling, etc.	169	Yes (no change)
Condition Observed at start of interaction	Condition of animal~~species~~ at the start of the interaction (use codes A0-A3, D or U).	170	Yes (text change only)
Condition Observed at end of interaction	Condition of animal ~~species~~ at the end of the interaction (use codes A0-A3, D or U)	171	Yes (text change only)
Description of interaction	Indicate interaction, with the vessel gear only - caught on line - tangled in net, etc.	174	Yes (text change only)
Number of Animals Sighted	How many animals are sighted during interaction.	175	Yes (text change only)