TECHNICAL AND COMPLIANCE COMMITTEE
Sixteenth Regular Session
Electronic Meeting
23 – 29 September 2020

INFORMATION PAPER ON A COOPERATIVE MONITORING, CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE ACTIVITY IN THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL PACIFIC FISHERIES COMMISSION CONVENTION AREA: OPERATION NASSE 2020

WCPFC-TCC16-2020-DP05
22 September 2020

Submitted by Australia on behalf of Australia, France,
New Zealand and the United States

Information paper on a cooperative Monitoring, Control and Surveillance activity in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Convention Area: Operation Nasse 2020.

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Introduction

Operation Nasse is an annual regional maritime monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) operation between Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (QUAD) partners Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States of America. Operation Nasse is conducted in the high seas of the south west Pacific Ocean and has been completed annually since 2015, with the USA joining in 2016. This year also saw the involvement of officers from the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre (RFSC).

The objective of Operation Nasse is to detect and deter illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing for species regulated by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) on the high seas. The Area of Operation (AO) is the high seas areas adjacent to the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of the French Territories (New Caledonia and French Polynesia), Australia (which includes Norfolk Island), Fiji, New Zealand, Tonga, Niue, and the Cook Islands (Figure 1). Activities include centralised coordination of resources, aerial surveillance and sea surface platforms, monitoring via Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), and high seas boarding and inspections (HSBIs) of fishing vessels to verify compliance with WCPFC Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs). In 2020, activities were constrained to monitoring activities only, with reduced high seas boardings and inspections due to COVID-19 safety considerations.

This report highlights some of the key successes and challenges experienced during Operation Nasse 2020, including opportunities and constraints resulting from the current COVID-19 operating environment.

Operation Nasse 2020

Operation Nasse 2020 (Op Nasse20) objectives were to:

- detect, investigate and report IUU fishing activity;
- gather intelligence and validate information being reported to WCPFC;
- monitor compliance with relevant WCPFC CMMs; and
- enhance MCS tools and multi-lateral communications to support regional and national maritime surveillance efforts.

This year, QUAD partners focused on assessing vessel behaviours and patterns in the Op Nasse20 AO for:

- VMS reporting to the WCPFC;
- transhipment activities and reporting;
- seabird by-catch mitigation; and
- changes in fishing patterns compared to previous years.

QUAD partners requested WCPFC MCS information under the 2009 non-public domain data rules[1] to support the planning and delivery of the operation. QUAD partners thank the WCPFC Secretariat for their support of Op Nasse20 through the provision of MCS data in accordance with WCPFC data rules. The provision of such data enabled QUAD partners to direct operational activities to areas of particular interest and maximised the effectiveness of surveillance platforms.

Op Nasse20 was conducted under a restricted COVID-19 safe operating environment. QUAD partners spent additional time and effort this year in the planning phase to ensure that any potential risks or impacts associated with COVID-19 were minimised and managed safely and appropriately. This included a number of operational changes to minimise COVID-19 risks to all vessels (patrol and fishing) and personnel (fisheries officers and crew).

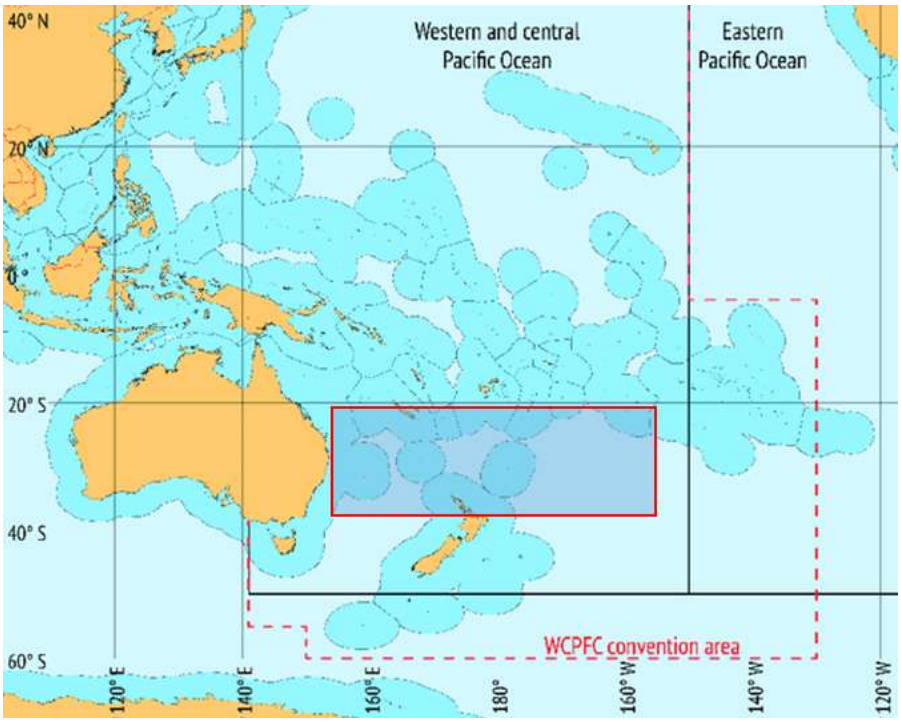

Figure 1. Operation Nasse, Area of Operation

HSBI activities provide valuable insight into the performance and operation of offshore fisheries and the effectiveness of management measures. COVID-19 changed the operating environment for Op Nasse20 as many flag States were considering, developing or implementing safety protocols and approaches for their respective fishing vessels. QUAD partners have a number of extant health and safety protocols to mitigate risks of transmission of diseases, including COVID-19, associated with the boarding of vessels. In light of broader international concern regarding flag States' development and use of safety protocols for their fishing vessels, QUAD partners decided not to conduct physical boardings in 2020.

[1] 2009 Rules and Procedures for the Protection, Access to, and Dissemination of High Seas Non-Public Domain Data and Information Compiled by the Commission for the Purpose of Monitoring, Control or Surveillance (MCS) Activities and the Access to and Dissemination of High Seas VMS Data for Scientific Purposes.

Op Nasse20 focused heavily on aerial surveillance activities to collect information and deter potential IUU fishing. In addition, relevant information was collected in the form of radio interrogations and the collection of imagery.

During Op Nasse20, QUAD partners conducted a range of data analyses including:

- validation of fishing vessel position reporting against VMS (FFA and WCPFC), AIS and other sources of reporting;
- correlation of transhipment reporting (notifications and declarations) and activity analysis;
- level of compliance with WCPFC CMMs, with particular focus on CMM 2018-03 regarding seabird mitigation measures and the extension of the application of that CMM from 30°S to 25°S which came into effect 1 January 2020; and
- vessel risk based profiling under CMM 2006-08 (Boarding and Inspection Procedures), paragraph 10, for prioritisation of vessels for MCS efforts.

COVID-19 has impacted Pacific fisheries in multiple ways and there have been a range of responses implemented across the Pacific. Media have reported on key ports that have closed as well as changes to work practices in processing facilities and market impacts with the downturn in restaurant trade. . These restrictions were easing by the end of the operation. Ongoing analysis of fishing behaviour in response to these drivers will assist in identifying risk areas into the future.

Fleet composition trends

Operation Nasse annually monitors longline (LL) fleet compositions and vessel activity within the AO.

Since 2015, the LL fleets have been consistently comprised from five flag States. Over the last six years, the overall number of fishing vessels has decreased with the fleet composition by flag State fluctuating (Figure 2).

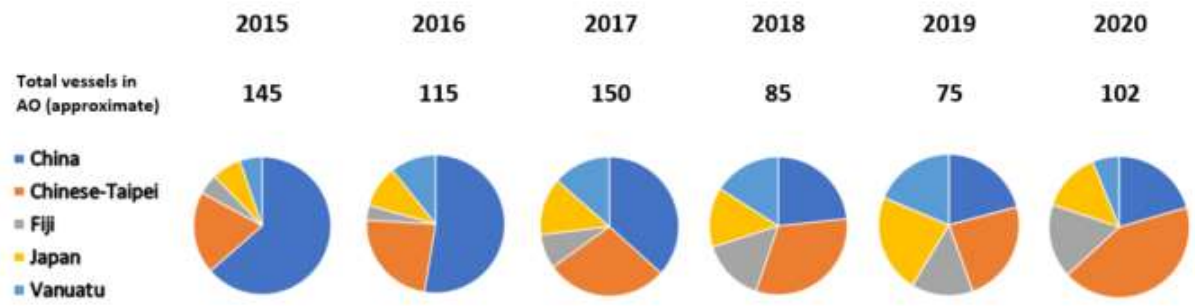

Figure 2. Indicative LL fleet composition in the AO over 2015-2020

Over the past six years, there has been an increase in the number of bunker and carrier vessels registered on the WCPFC Record of Fishing Vessels. Of note, 2017 was the first time a carrier vessel was inspected in the AO during at-sea patrols.

VMS and reporting to the WCPFC

A focus of Operation Nasse is to monitor fishing vessels' compliance with WCPFC VMS obligations[2] while operating in the high seas. The WCPFC require flag States to direct their vessels to provide real time VMS reports to the WCPFC Secretariat when fishing in the high seas of the WCPFC. Failure to comply with VMS provisions may also be an indicator of other IUU fishing activity.

VMS is a key component of effective fisheries MCS. VMS data is particularly valuable when compared against other available datasets to help detect suspected IUU fishing. During Op Nasse20 sightings data was compared to WCPFC VMS and to Automatic Identification System (AIS) reports as well as other available information.

During Op Nasse 20 the polling of vessels on VMS was monitored and, where vessels appeared to have discrepancies in reporting, the vessels were identified as a high priority (CMM 2006-08). This then informs the plans and priorities of surface assets or other responses. Technical or non-intentional faults inhibit the accuracy of risk assessments and incorrectly identify non-compliant activity.

In previous years, Operation Nasse has recorded significant instances of potential WCPFC VMS non-compliance by vessels. In many cases, vessels are polling to their national Fisheries Monitoring Centre (FMC) but due to suspected technical faults are not showing up on the WCPFC VMS picture. However, Op Nasse20 saw high VMS compliance rates, determined through the correlation of aerial and surface patrol assets' data with WCPFC VMS reporting data. All vessels identified were reporting on WCPFC VMS. Compared to previous years, this is noteworthy.

Transhipment activities and reporting

Since 2015, the number of reported high seas transhipment events in WCPFC has been increasing and now sits at a record high[3]. Recognising the ongoing work within WCPFC to improve the transparency and monitoring of transhipment activity, Op Nasse 20 monitored compliance with CMM 2013-05 (Daily Catch and Effort reporting) and CMM 2009-06 (Regulation of Transhipment). Non-declared transhipment activities obscure catch transfer and traceability. Misreporting of catch and effort is a serious violation under CMM 2006-08 (WCPFC Boarding and Inspection Procedures).

Prior knowledge of, or detections of, transhipments, and the ability to monitor, is a useful tool for gaining a better understanding of catch and operating patterns. WCPFC transhipment reports (notifications and declarations) were requested under the 2009 non-public domain data rules to support targeted asset deployment and analyses on transhipment activity during Op Nasse20. Transhipment analyses included:

- a comparison of transhipment notifications and declarations with corresponding vessels in the AO.
- corroboration of transhipment notifications and any vessel encounters identified on AIS or VMS.

All vessels that transhipped were authorised to do so as set out in the WCPFC Register of Fishing Vessels (RFV). Transhipment notifications were useful for refining deployment of assets, particularly

[2] Conservation and Management Measure for Commission VMS 2014-02.
[3] Annual Report on WCPFC Transhipment Reporting, 16th Technical and Compliance Committee (TCC16) - https://www.wcpfc.int/node/47672.

aerial surveillance, to areas of transhipment activity. This year, the number of transhipment events in the AO were higher when compared to previous years, this was likely due to COVID-related port closures.

Seabird mitigation measures

CMM 2018-03 requires vessels to use mitigation devices to reduce capture of seabirds. The application of these mitigation requirements came into effect from 1 January 2020 (extending from 30°S to 25°S).The seabird mitigation requirements now cover the vast majority of the Op Nasse AO.

During OpNasse20, aerial and surface surveillance monitored vessel activities in CMM 2018-03 applicable zones, and noted the presence or absence and condition of tori lines and tori poles that were visible and or in use.

Vessels that use tori lines as a mitigation measure must also have an appropriate attachment point such as a tori pole, to be compliant with CM 2018-03. This year, tori poles were evident on a number of vessels and vessels that previously were found non-compliant with tori poles were observed to have rectified this and installed tori poles (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Examples of tori pole deployment from Op Nasse 20. Source: AFMA

Unreported or misreporting of sea-bird interactions as part of operational level catch and effort data distorts the overall reported levels and distributions on fishing mortality. On a large scale, this behaviour undermines the science and therefore WCPFC's management framework.

Operation Nasse has seen a gradual improvement in the design of tori lines and tori poles over the years[4]. However, further efforts are required by vessel operators and their flag States to ensure compliance with CMM 2018-03. Flag States are asked to work closely with their fleets in ensuring that all tori lines and tori poles meet the specifications outlined in CMM 2018-03 to mitigate seabird mortality during fishing operations.

[4] WCPFC-TCC15-2019-DP06_rev1 and WCPFC-TCC13-2017-DP07

Summary

Operation Nasse provides a valuable opportunity to monitor compliance with WCPFC CMMs and gather information on how the respective CMMs work in practice. Importantly, these operations provide an opportunity for boarding teams to provide education and information on applicable CMMs to improve compliance on the high seas.

Over the six years of Operation Nasse, an overall increase in general compliance with CMMs is evident. With each year, various methods for improving communication between inspectors and fishers have been used to overcome translation and language barriers. This exchange of information and engagement provides for a combination of education and awareness of CMMs, and an opportunity for both fishing vessel crews and inspectors to better understand how CMMs are implemented at the vessel level. This is highlighted when previously inspected vessels have been able to show the next inspection authorities the previous boarding reports and how they have rectified any non-compliance.

The successful deployment of aerial and surface patrols are critical to the ability of Op Nasse to ensure vessel level compliance with WCPFC CMMs. These MCS operations also ensure that requirements relating to vessel level reporting are met, using a range of verification tools and data such as VMS, observers, electronic monitoring and transhipment reporting.

COVID-19 has had wide ranging impacts, fleets and regulators will continue to modify approaches to ensure that there is adequate monitoring of fishing activity, albeit with appropriate measures to minimise exposure. This operation has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to MCS in the high seas but also highlighted the need for supplementary MCS capabilities in times of crisis where physical operations may be reduced.

We take this opportunity to thank the vessel operators involved in Operation Nasse 2020 and thank the WCPFC Secretariat, FFA staff of the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre, Fiji and other FFA partners for their assistance.

Figure 4. Coast Guard Cutter Kimball (WMSL 756) and an Air Station Barbers Point HC-130 Hercules airplane. Source: USCG