

Strategic Reorientation of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC)

WECAFC is one of the *regional fisheries bodies* established under the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Unlike regional fisheries management organizations like ICCAT, it serves only an advisory role. It cannot establish binding conservation and management measures.

There are 34 members of WECAFC, including the United States. All are coastal States with territories within the WECAFC area (Fig. 1), or States whose vessels engage in fishing in this area. (More detailed information about WECAFC can be found at:

<http://www.fao.org/fishery/rfb/wecafc/en>.)

WECAFC has created working groups on topics of particular interest, including queen conch, spiny lobster, spawning aggregations, fish aggregating devices (FADs), sharks and recreational fisheries (with a focus on billfish). It also coordinates with other international bodies with a role in managing the shared fish stocks of the wider Caribbean.

NMFS and the Caribbean Fishery Management Council have long contributed to several initiatives within WECAFC in order to improve regional collaboration, including research and data improvement.

At its last biennial meeting in 2016, WECAFC agreed to launch a process to revise its framework to enable the organization to develop binding conservation and management measures.

The United States has a significant number of shared, transboundary fish stocks in the wider Caribbean. A regional management body with binding authority could help to level the playing field for U.S. fishers.

The State Department, with the close collaboration of NMFS, will lead U.S. engagement in the WECAFC strategic reorientation process.

There are many basic questions still to be answered, including the geographic and species scope of any new mechanism, what form or structure it will take, and how it will relate to existing bodies like ICCAT.

Although this process will likely take many years, NMFS and the State Department would like to engage with the relevant Regional Fishery Management Councils at this early stage to help ensure awareness and transparency among stakeholders, and to begin gathering their input into U.S. positions and priorities.

NMFS and the Department of State will continue to keep the Councils regularly apprised throughout the WECAFC strategic reorientation process.



Figure 1. WECAFC area of competence (FAO). The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC), established in 1973, currently operates as a regional fisheries body under Article VI of the FAO Constitution and acts as an advisory body to promote the effective conservation, management, and development of living marine resources in the wider Caribbean. The current area of competence of WECAFC is depicted by the areas in blue.