



## **FIPs we can believe in?**

Fishery improvement projects (FIPs) are now being widely adopted by seafood supply chains as a constructive approach to engaging fisheries that are not yet sustainably managed. The implementation of a FIP, actively supported by stakeholders in the fishery, can allow buyers to continue sourcing while improvements are underway.

One important aspect of the FIP approach is that all parts of the supply chain (and especially consumers) must have confidence that the improvements promised by the FIP will actually materialize. Retailers and others in the supply chain need to be sure that the public claims they make about FIPs are accurate and supported by genuine, measurable progress.

Such assurance would be fairly simple if there were an international standard for FIPs that had been agreed by many parties, but this does not currently exist and seems a distant ambition.

Meanwhile, the need to establish confidence in the authenticity of an improvement project has introduced the concept of a 'credible FIP.' However, the term 'credible' has no objective and agreed definition, and even if a definition were agreed, views of what seems credible vary from one party to another.

Sustainable Fisheries Partnership (SFP) does not use the term 'credible FIP,' but does believe that there are minimum criteria for a project that, if met, constitute a genuine improvement effort. A fishery improvement project should meet all of the following criteria:

- Mobilize the commercial players in the supply chain to improve a fishery
- Be based on an initial assessment of the problems in the fishery and address as a priority those issues in greatest need of improvement
- Have a public workplan with measurable indicators and an associated budget
- Have a public commitment by the participants in the FIP to make improvements according to the workplan
- A willingness by participants to make the investments required by the workplan and budget
- Establish a public system for reporting and tracking progress.

These criteria are derived from an agreement among non-governmental organizations belonging to the [Conservation Alliance](#) in the US and are widely accepted as an adequate measure of commitment to improvement

This list could certainly be expanded. For instance, the initial assessment could be based on the Marine Stewardship Council certification methodology and there could be a clear public statement that the project would be certified within a given number of years. These additional elements certainly add to the prestige of improvement projects but should not be considered as essential. Projects that are genuinely working to achieve improvements in fisheries need not seek certification to a particular standard in order to succeed.

Even projects that meet the minimum criteria will greatly vary in terms of practical arrangements and ambition and will inevitably carry differing levels of risk. It will be for each individual organization within the supply chain to make their own decisions about involvement based on their experiences, internal guidelines, and appetite for risk.

### **Measuring and reporting progress**

One of the crucial activities of a FIP is measuring and publicly reporting progress. Improvement projects need to be able to demonstrate that they are delivering the required changes and these claims have to be verified through evidence. This can be done in many ways and a frequent, comprehensive, third-party audit against the workplan is certainly a highly robust option.

However, third-party audits can be expensive and may not be cost effective for an improvement project operating on meager resources. Under these circumstances, a FIP could rely on a desk study based on data that is generated by several third parties in the public domain (for instance, scientific papers, government science data, newspaper reports of meetings, or policy changes) for a 'light touch' assessment.

Alternatively, a FIP could use a range of approaches – for instance, adopt a light touch for quarterly and annual progress reviews, but complete a robust third-party audit every 3 years.

A great deal also depends on who is seeking the assurance of progress. If a retailer or processor wishes to finance audits (or any kind of verification) of FIPs for their own peace of mind, it is expected that FIP participants will comply.

Eventually, it is likely that some kind of FIP standard will be agreed and that projects will be audited to that standard. However, until that time it is necessary to adopt a flexible approach that reflects the many different kinds of fishery improvement projects currently operating while adhering to the minimum criteria deemed acceptable by a wide range of stakeholders.