

# FAQ: What is a Regional Fishery Management Organization?

**FACT SHEET** February 23, 2012 Topics: [Ocean Conservation](#) Projects: [Protecting the Deep Sea](#), [Global Tuna Conservation](#), [Global Shark Conservation](#), [Ending Illegal Fishing & Improving Management of International Fisheries](#) Read time: 5 min

## Q: What is an RFMO?

**A:** An RFMO—short for regional fisheries management organization—is an international body made up of countries that share a practical and/or financial interest in managing and conserving fish stocks in a particular region. These include coastal States, whose waters are home to at least part of an identified fish stock, and “distant water fishing nations” (DWFN), whose fleets travel to areas where a fish stock is found.

RFMOs are established by international agreements or treaties and can take different forms. Some focus on regulating fishing for a particular species or group of species. Others have a broader mandate, with responsibility to ensure that the fishery does not negatively affect the wider marine ecosystem and the species within it.

---

## Tuna RFMOs:

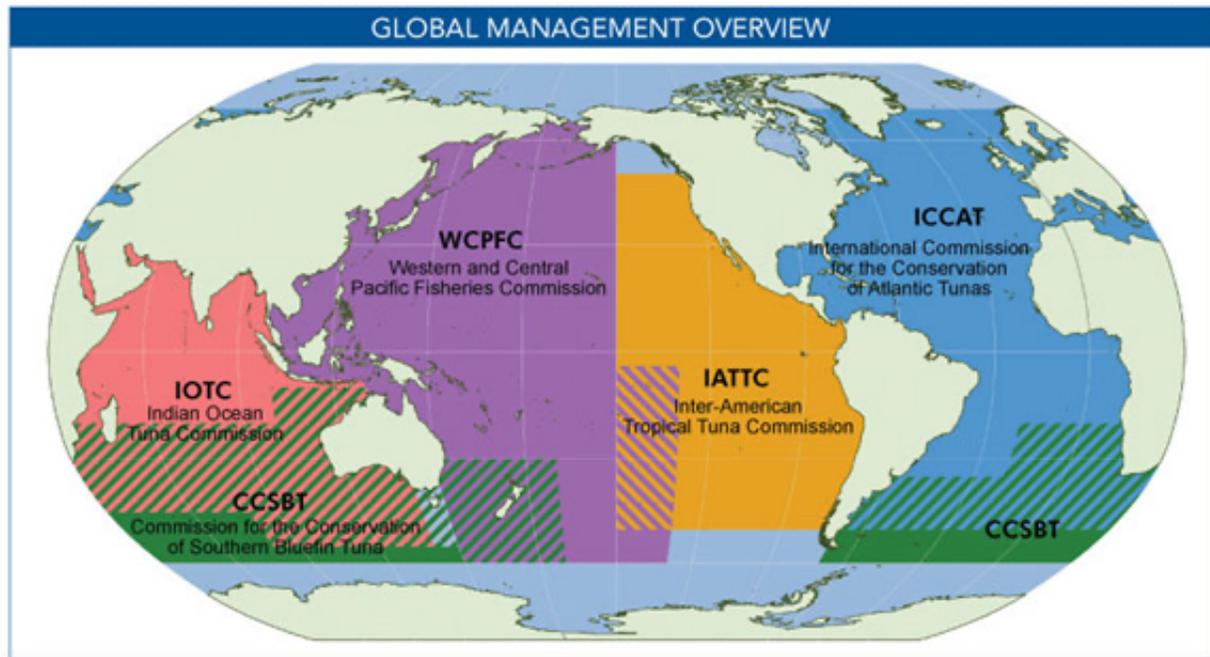
- [CCSBT](#)- Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna
- [IATTC](#)- Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission
- [ICCAT](#)- International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
- [IOTC](#)- Indian Ocean Tuna Commission
- [WCPFC](#) - Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

---

## Q: How many RFMOs are there worldwide?

**A:** There are approximately 17 RFMOs covering various geographic areas, some of which overlap. Of these, five are the so-called tuna RFMOs, which manage fisheries for tuna and other large species such as swordfish and marlin. Together, the five tuna RFMOs have

responsibility for managing fisheries in approximately 91 percent of the world's oceans.



---

**Q: Can a country belong to more than one RFMO?**

**A:** Yes. Any country with a fisheries interest in the region managed by a particular RFMO may apply to join that RFMO, as long as it agrees to certain provisions. These include sharing data about the fishery, abiding by the rules of that RFMO, and contributing funds for scientific assessments, among others. Countries with large fishing fleets that span the globe, like the United States, Japan, and the European Union (EU), are members of many RFMOs, including nearly all the tuna ones. The EU, for example, is a member of 10 RFMOs.

**Q: How do RFMOs make decisions?**

**A:** Every fishery organization is structured differently. In general, each has some sort of scientific committee that gathers data to guide establishment of sustainable catch levels for various species. Once members agree to the recommended measures, managers from member countries devise an implementation plan for the coming year that is usually set in place through consensus (all member countries must agree) or a voting process. Most RFMOs also have subcommittees that work on special topics such as promoting compliance with the group's decisions.

**Q: What types of fish do RFMOs manage?**

**A:** RFMOs usually focus on commercially valuable species—typically those for human consumption. Although specific fish species vary according to the purpose of the RFMO and its geographic area, RFMOs generally manage highly migratory stocks that travel long distances, such as tunas. They also manage “straddling” fish stocks, which move between the waters of more than one country or between national and international waters (200 miles from shore).



### **Q: Are RFMOs responsible for managing other marine species?**

**A:** Although many RFMOs focus exclusively on commercial fish stocks, some recently established ones are also required to manage other species or aspects of the marine ecosystem. The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, for example, is responsible not only for tuna, but also for sharks, seabirds, and turtles affected by fishing. Likewise, the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission adopted the Antigua Convention in 2010 to formalize its mandate to manage fisheries by applying an ecosystem approach: to consider all the marine species within its convention area.

### **Q: Are all of the marine fisheries resources in the world's oceans covered by an RFMO?**

**A:** No. RFMOs typically focus only on a limited number of species, and some large areas of the ocean, even with significant fishing activity, are unmanaged. Many RFMOs, for example, do not oversee fishing for sharks or for many deep-sea fish species, even if these activities occur within their convention area. Many nongovernmental organizations and countries believe a stronger international system of ocean governance is required to ensure a sustainable marine environment.

### **Q: Can one fishery be managed by more than one RFMO?**

**A:** Yes. This may occur where a particular fish population migrates between areas under different RFMOs, or where the geographic areas covered by two RFMOs overlap. The ambiguities that result can undermine the effectiveness of management measures. Efforts are being made to improve coordination between RFMOs.

### **Q: How do RFMOs determine catch levels for a species? How often are**

## **these decisions reviewed?**

**A:** In theory, many RFMOs are required to base the amount of allowable catch on the best available science. These decisions are then reviewed annually. In reality, the decisions are often highly political, and some RFMOs have consistently adopted catch levels much higher than scientists considered sustainable. In many cases, RFMOs use inadequate tools to limit catches. For example, instead of setting catch limits, some RFMOs attempt to prevent overfishing by limiting the number of days a vessel is allowed to fish in a year. This encourages the deployment of more-efficient vessels that can catch more fish in less time, resulting in overfishing.

## **Q: Are the decisions of an RFMO binding on member countries?**

**A:** Yes. When a country joins an RFMO, it agrees to abide by the group's decisions. In practice, however, it can be difficult to identify vessels, ports, authorities, and some countries do not play by the rules.

## **Q: How do RFMOs promote compliance?**

**A:** Over the years, some RFMOs have worked to develop techniques to promote compliance with their decisions. Catch documentation systems are one innovative approach, although they are not yet widely used. These systems allow managers to trace each fish to the vessel that caught it to ensure that it was not taken illegally. Compliance is also sought by tracking vessels in a particular area. Although each RFMO has a list of authorized vessels, there is no uniformity for registration and vessel information. Adding to the confusion, many vessels are registered with more than one RFMO, regardless of where they are currently fishing. A uniform list of registered and legal vessels is needed.

## **Q: How successful are RFMOs at preventing overfishing and maintaining healthy fish stocks?**

**A:** Although RFMOs play an important role in facilitating cooperation between fishing countries, historically they have failed to prevent overfishing and maintain healthy fish stocks. Because many RFMOs were established when ocean resources were believed to be virtually unlimited, they often are not structured to limit fishing effectively. Members of RFMOs often lack the political will or clear incentives to decrease the number of vessels authorized to fish in a particular area, or to make decisions based on scientific advice that may constrain their national fishing or processing industries. Moreover, several RFMOs have very limited mandates that prevent them from considering and addressing the impacts of

fishing on the marine ecosystem as a whole. Nonetheless, RFMOs are the only international bodies responsible for managing certain fisheries, and it is important for those stakeholders with an interest in sustainability to continue to work with them and their member governments to strengthen and improve decision-making.

**Q: How does Pew interact with RFMOs?**

**A:** Pew works with RFMOs to achieve a number of specific conservation and management goals (a) to conserve tuna, sharks, and vulnerable deep-sea species and habitats, and (b) to combat illegal fishing. Pew seeks to help RFMOs improve management and governance and to build the political will needed to drive conservation action and accountability by all RFMO members.