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Report from the Outcome of the Debate of the 41st Session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

Executive Summary

The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) is the Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO), established under the provision of Article XIV of the FAO Constitution, in order to rationally manage fisheries and sustainably develop aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Fifteen out of its 24 contracting parties, plus the European Union, and four of its cooperating non-contracting parties are currently FAO member countries in the Europe and Central Asia region. At its last two annual sessions, in 2016 and 2017 respectively, the GFCM adopted a number of management measures for both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Thanks to the adoption of a mid-term strategy for the years 2017-2020, the GFCM currently contributes to accelerating progress at the regional level toward meeting the targets set in the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14¹.

¹ SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

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I. General background information

1. The GFCM was established in 1949, pursuant to Article XIV of the FAO Constitution, and came into force in 1952. In 2014, the GFCM amended for the fourth time its constitutive agreement with a view to modernizing its institutional and legal framework and furthering its role in the Europe and Central Asia region. This role is of primary importance, given that 15 out of 24 contracting parties to the GFCM,² as well as all four of its cooperating non-contracting parties,³ are FAO member countries in the Europe and Central Asia region.

2. The fisheries and aquaculture sectors in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions are currently regulated by the GFCM as a result of the power of the commission to adopt binding recommendations with a view to promoting the conservation and sustainable use, at biological, social, economic, and environmental levels, of living marine resources, as well as the sustainable development of aquaculture. The implementation of these recommendations is facilitated by the GFCM Secretariat, which backstops the commission's four statutory committees, namely the Scientific Advisory Committee on Aquaculture (CAQ), the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries (SAC), the Compliance Committee (CoC), and the Committee on Administration and Finance (CAF).

3. The main challenges affecting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions include the overexploitation of main commercial species, interactions among fisheries/aquaculture and other human activities, and the incidence of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Within the Black Sea region, significant efforts are currently being made by the GFCM to promote enhanced cooperation in fisheries and aquaculture, including via an ongoing technical project called BlackSea4Fish that is backstopped by a dedicated technical unit in Burgas, Bulgaria.

II. Relevant outcomes of the GFCM Sessions

4. The Forty-first Session of the GFCM was held in October 2017 in Montenegro.

5. The Forty-first Session of the GFCM granted cooperating non-contracting party status to the Republic of Moldova in light of its increasing involvement in GFCM activities. A total of eight binding recommendations were adopted, including a multiannual management plan for turbot fisheries in the Black Sea, a regional plan of action to fight IUU fishing, and an international joint inspection and surveillance scheme outside the waters under national jurisdiction in the Strait of Sicily.

6. In light of the growing importance of the GFCM in the Black Sea, the commission also decided to organize a high-level conference on Black Sea Fisheries and Aquaculture, which will be held in Sofia on 7 June 2018. This conference will be open to all countries in the greater Black Sea area. Similarly, a high-level meeting on Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea will be held in Malta, on 26 September 2018. Both conferences are expected to adopt ministerial declarations. Finally, from 10 to 14 December 2018 the Forum on Fisheries Science in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea will be organized by the GFCM at FAO headquarters in Rome so as to bring together the wider community of scientists and experts working on fisheries and the marine environment in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.⁴

² Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. The European Union is also a contracting party to the GFCM.

³ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The GFCM also enjoys close cooperation with the Russian Federation.

⁴ More information on the FishForum is available at this link: <http://www.fao.org/gfcm/fishforum2018/en/>

7. The annual budget of the GFCM in 2018 amounts to USD 2 532 162. In addition, the GFCM has been granted extrabudgetary funds amounting to approximately USD 5 million. The current mandate of the GFCM Bureau was exceptionally extended for one year.

8. Additionally, the Fortieth Session of the GFCM, held in May–June 2016 in Malta, granted cooperating non-contracting party status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in light of its increasing involvement in GFCM activities. Moreover, in order to accelerate regional progress towards achieving the targets in SDG 14, the GFCM adopted its “Mid-term Strategy (2017–2020) towards the Sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries,” which represents the fruit of the commitment of contracting parties, cooperating non-contracting parties, and partner organizations to improve, by 2020, the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries and to ensure that the alarming trend in the status of commercially exploited stocks is reversed. The mid-term strategy is based on five targets, namely: (1) reverse the declining trend of fish stocks through strengthened scientific advice in support of management; (2) support livelihoods for coastal communities through sustainable small-scale fisheries; (3) curb IUU fishing, through a regional plan of action; (4) minimize and mitigate unwanted interactions between fisheries and marine ecosystems and the environment; and (5) enhance capacity-building and cooperation.⁵

9. Furthermore, seven binding recommendations were adopted at the Fortieth Session of the GFCM, including a multiannual management plan for the fisheries in the Strait of Sicily and a set of measures for scientific monitoring, management and control of turbot fisheries in the Black Sea.

⁵ The text of the mid-term strategy is available at this link: <http://www.fao.org/gfcm/activities/fisheries/mid-term-strategy>