

Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs): Introduction and Global Overview

Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs) are considered a promising market-based intervention to facilitate transitions to more sustainable fisheries. By employing a multi-stakeholder approach, these projects aim to use the power of the private sector to address environmental challenges in fisheries by improving management and fishing practices. To meet the growing demand for sustainably sourced seafood, FIPs have substantially increased in number since the intervention emerged around 2003 and are now a key feature of the global seafood landscape. In this brief, we provide an introduction to FIPs and their historical and recent developments globally.

A short history and explanation of Fishery Improvement Projects

The focus on achieving fisheries sustainability has in recent decades been broadened from government management and initiatives to also include additional stakeholders and private incentives.¹ As such, there has been a rise in market-based initiatives and multi-stakeholder collaborations for sustainably sourced seafood. A growing number of these initiatives, including certifications and standards for sustainable seafood, have been promoted by NGOs, industry, and retailers. Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs) have emerged from this context, and can be a sustainability pathway for fisheries that do not currently meet sustainability standards (e.g., Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certification) – each FIP is based on a strategic plan for actions that should lead to a change in policy or practices that bring the fishery in line with standards.^{2,3}

Increasing global implementation of FIPs

FIPs have increased in number from two in 2006 to over 130 in 2019 and are implemented all around the globe (Figure 1). Their recognition among multiple stakeholders makes them increasingly visible and a common tool for industry to engage in work towards sustainability. FIPs have increased as a result of the rise in numbers of commitments among industry actors to source from sustainable and certified fisheries.

The FIPs working model has evolved over 15 years and with input from different organizations. The FIP implementation landscape has historically been

dominated by two NGOs, the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership (SFP) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). FIPs have been applied in various ways in different fisheries and governance contexts, from large industrial fisheries in Europe to artisanal fisheries in Asia and Latin America. To date, FIPs have been implemented in over 70 countries' jurisdictions and include local to multinational fisheries, and have been led by either industry, NGOs, consultants, or governments⁴ (Figure 1). FIPs can be implemented on different scales, and can vary from national-level to local community-level engagement.

FIP guidelines and resources

- [The Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solution Guidelines](#)
- [FisheryProgress.org](#)
- [Fishsource](#)
- [SFP FIP Toolkit](#)
- [In-Transition to MSC \(ITM\) tool](#)
- [MSC Fishery Improvement tools](#)
- [SFP Supply Chain Roundtables](#)
- [FishChoice](#)
- [Social Responsibility Assessment Tool for the Seafood Sector](#)
- [Monterey Framework for Social Responsibility](#)

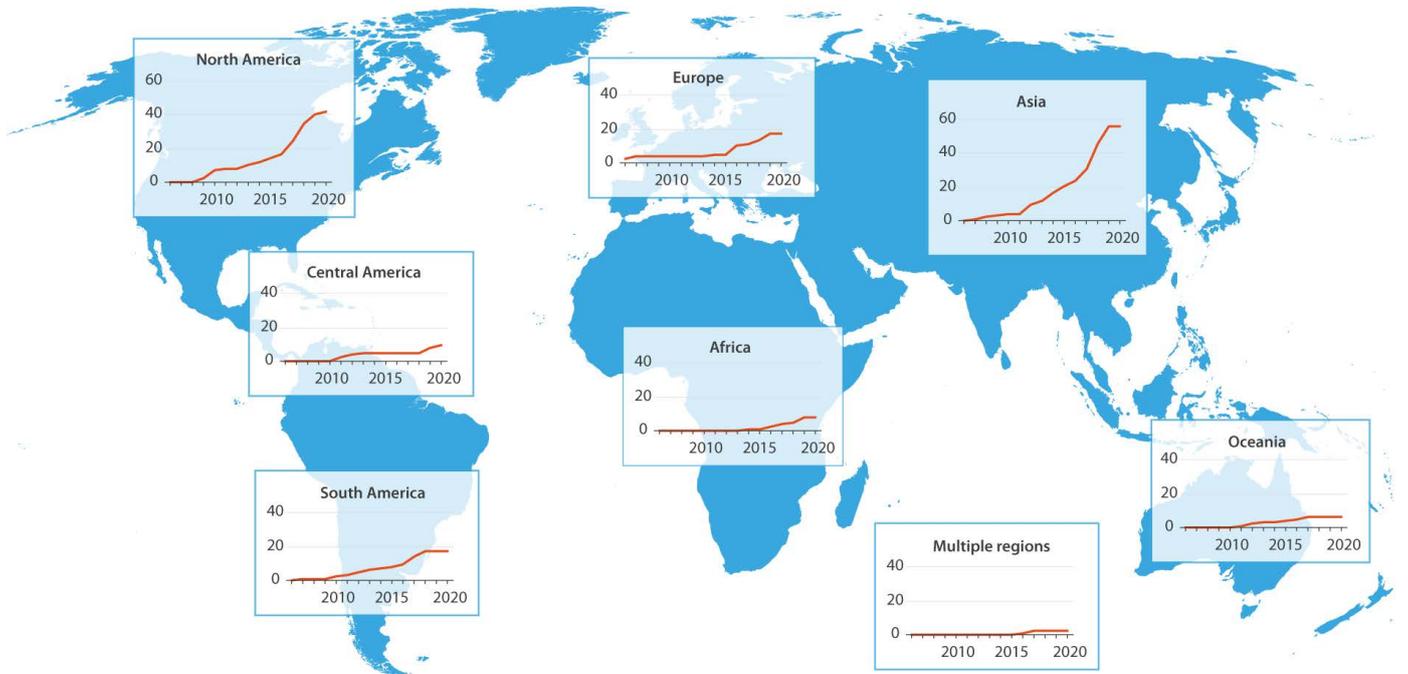


Figure 1. Cumulative number of FIPs launched over time by continent (Source: CEA 2020).ⁱ

The Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions (Conservation Alliance), an umbrella platform of the major organizations engaged with sustainable seafood initiatives and FIPs, has developed widely-used guidelines for supporting FIPs.^{2,3} These guidelines define a FIP as “a multi-stakeholder effort to address environmental challenges in a fishery. These projects utilize the power of the private sector to incentivize positive changes toward sustainability in the fishery and seek to make these changes endure through policy change.”³ The Conservation Alliance categorizes FIPs into two types, either Basic or Comprehensive. Basic FIPs focus on a subset of environmental issues to improve upon, whereas Comprehensive FIPs address all

ⁱ One caveat about the statistics in this map: It does not show the number of active FIPs in a given year. Rather, it represents the number of FIPs that were active in that year that still remain today. For example, the value in 2010 for Asia is 4. This means that of all the FIPs that were active in Asia in 2010, 4 remain active today.

environmental matters covered under the MSC Fisheries Standard and often have an end goal of achieving certification. Comprehensive FIPs must also have an independent audit of their progress against the MSC standard every third year.³ However, it is important to note that not all FIPs have MSC as an end goal. While some FIPs do not aim for any certification in the short term, others might be aspiring to other types of certifications and ratings such as Seafood Watch ‘Best Choice’ or ‘Good Alternative’ or Fair Trade.⁴

There are also other types of improvement projects that are acknowledged by the sustainable seafood community as improvement efforts but are not considered FIPs. One example is the MarinTrust Improver Programmeⁱⁱ (formerly known as IFFO), which

ⁱⁱ For more information see [MarinTrust](#)

What makes a FIP a FIP?

The Conservation Alliance has developed five key criteria that FIPs need to meet in order to receive formal recognition:

- active participation by private actors in the supply chain (e.g., suppliers, retailers, fishing industry);
- public commitments by participants to financially invest and make improvements to the fishery;
- defined near-term scope of the project with a set of time-bound objectives;
- a publicly available work plan with an associated budget and deadlines;
- a publicly available progress report that regularly tracks work toward the activities and objectives defined in the work plan.

The FIP process is divided into a stepwise progress with five different stages:

1. FIP development
2. FIP launch
3. FIP implementation
4. Improvements in fishing practices or fishery management
5. Improvements on the water

Aquaculture Improvement Projects (AIPs)

Alongside the growth in FIPs, there have also been some recent development with regard to Aquaculture Improvement Projects (AIPs). Like a FIP, an AIP is a multi-stakeholder approach that addresses environmental challenges in aquaculture production by using the power of the private sector.¹⁵ In 2016, CEA conducted a global review of the AIP landscape to develop a baseline for the nascent intervention.¹⁶ In 2019, SFP developed an AIP toolkit with direction on how to initiate, implement, and report an AIP based on the Conservation Alliance FIP guidelines as well as a website for information and reporting (AIP Directory: <https://aipdirectory.org/>).¹⁵ Currently there are eight active AIPs registered.¹⁷

specifies improvements for producers, in line with the MarinTrust Standard, in order for factories to reach the standard and become certified. Another example is the Asian Seafood Improvement Collaborative (ASIC)ⁱⁱⁱ which is a collaboration among stakeholders from Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam working together for social and environmental sustainability. A final example is the newly released Seafood MAP^{iv}, which aims to support non-certified producers, both small-scale fishers and farmers, to become more sustainable.

Public reporting by FIPs

FisheryProgress^v is the main reporting site, where over 95% of FIPs publicly share their progress. This web-based platform is supported by multiple organizations including the Conservation Alliance, and led by the NGO FishChoice. FisheryProgress was developed in 2016 as a global platform for FIP reporting and has improved the quality, continuity and transparency of FIP reporting and progress.^{4,5} Although updates are reviewed by FisheryProgress and the Technical Oversight Committee (TOC) before being published, they are not independently audited, as FIP progress is self-reported.

FisheryProgress uses the MSC Fisheries Standard to measure the environmental performance of fisheries and the progress FIPs make over time and is updated twice a year.

On the FisheryProgress platform, the FIP profiles include information such as the type of FIP (Basic or Comprehensive), its status (i.e., inactive, active, prospective, completed), and basic documents including workplans. Key metrics are the FIP stages

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information see [Asian Seafood Improvement Collaborative \(ASIC\)](#)

^{iv} For more information see [Seafood Map](#)

^v See fisheryprogress.org

(described above), the performance against the MSC Fisheries Standard indicators and FIP progress ratings. FIP progress is a metric generated by SFP, and each FIP is rated with the letters A-E to show whether they have met the FIP's defined milestones in a timely manner.⁶ Additional information, such as social impacts, can also be added to FIP profiles.⁷

In addition to FisheryProgress, FishSource^{vi} is another online resource that can be used by industry to view detailed information about FIPs and fisheries. This database shows status of fisheries, fish stocks, and aquaculture by summarizing scientific and technical information. FishSource's aim is to provide seafood buyers with information about the sustainability of fisheries and the improvements that might be needed.

Growing role of seafood companies in FIPs

Seafood companies are increasingly leading and implementing FIPs, and the role of some NGOs has recently shifted from being the main implementers of FIPs to providing more strategic and technical support.⁴ While retailers are important for FIPs as they generate the demand for sustainable seafood and motivate FIP creation,^{1,4} more focus has recently been put on mid-supply chain companies. Supply chain roundtables,^{vii} established and promoted by SFP, have become an increasingly popular pre-competitive platform to enable companies to support FIPs by commodity or region. These roundtables can coordinate FIP engagement, increase companies' influence over FIP progress, and have been viewed by participants as effective platforms for information and engagement, although activities vary across different roundtables.⁴ Supply chain roundtables participants have doubled in numbers over the last five years from 8 to 16, with 151 participating companies that engage in 69 FIPs globally.⁴

'Target 75' is another initiative from SFP showing the increasing role of companies in seafood sustainability. This initiative has been shown to be important in mobilizing industry and promoting the creation of FIPs around the globe and aims to ensure that 75% of the world's seafood production in key sectors is, at a minimum, sustainable or making regular, verifiable improvements.⁸

A global snapshot of FIPs today

In a review published in early 2020, CEA Consulting identified 136 active FIPs, and these have contributed to 19 certifications and at least three Seafood Watch Ratings promotions. The total number of completed, active, prospective, inactive or stalled FIPs was calculated as 369. There are other sources that report on FIP trends and number such as Fishery Improvement Projects Database (FIP-DB)^{viii} initiated by the SFP and run

^{vi} [Fishsource](#)

^{vii} For more information on Supply Chain Roundtables see SFP's [website](#)

^{viii} See [SFP FIP DB](#)

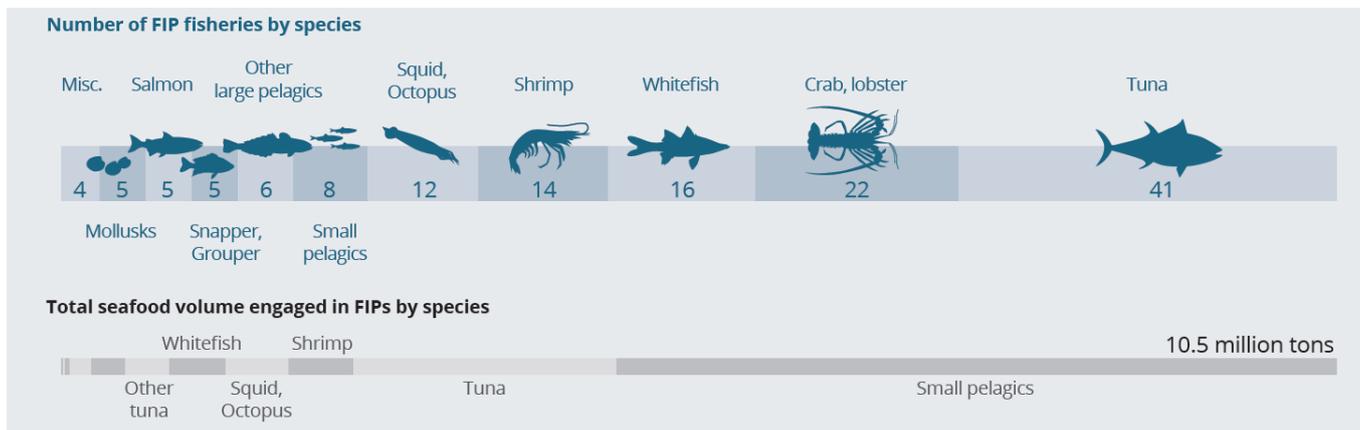


Figure 2. Number of FIPs per species as well as seafood volume engaged in FIPs by species. Source: CEA 2020

by the University of Washington^{2,9} and FisheryProgress. While the exact number of active, stalled and completed FIPs depends to some extent on which database is used, all databases conclude that the number of FIPs has been increasing over time.^{2,4,7,9}

The majority of active FIPs are currently located in the Americas and Asia, with Indonesia and Mexico having the highest number per country (Figure 1). That said, there are FIPs in all geographical regions, although some regions have more projects than others. Asia, especially South-East Asia, is the region with the largest increase in FIPs over the last five years, while Western Europe and Africa have the lowest numbers of FIPs compared with other regions. Approximately two-thirds of FIPs are located in countries with lower governance capacity.⁴

FIPs are also diversifying with regard to the types of seafood species they target. The most popular are currently tuna, whitefish, crab, and shrimp (Figure 2), with tuna accounting for 25% of all active or completed FIPs.⁴

Factors that contribute to and limit FIP success

The CEA FIP review (2020) concluded that there are certain external dynamics to the FIP that will influence performance regardless of how a FIP is implemented, such as:

- Government capacity for fishery management
- Initial fishery conditions
- Target species and fleet type

Internal factors that lead to successful implementation of FIPs include:

- **Leadership**
Good FIP leaders with established contacts with fisheries managers and governmental agencies as well as strong technical understanding of FIP processes and targeted sustainability standards. Local FIP leaders can quickly build trust and have better contextual understanding.
- **Stakeholder management**
FIPs need to engage the “right” stakeholders in

order to be powerful enough to create change. The stakeholder groups that should be included depend on the objectives of the FIP.

- **Effort level**
FIPs need continuity, which means that successful implementers work on FIPs for several years, maintain project momentum, and provide consistency for stakeholders. They also need sufficient funding as well as implementers who have the capacity to be dedicated and focus on the process (e.g., third party implementers).
- **Market leverage**
Supply chain structures and market destination matters. Shorter and vertically integrated supply chains can be reformed more effectively. Fisheries with a significant share of production destined for engaged markets with sustainability commitments have stronger incentives to make progress.

Examples of future direction of the FIP movement

Future research needed

There are limited peer-reviewed publications on FIPs’ effectiveness and impact, both in the water as well as overall influence on societies and human well-being. However, studies have shown that FIP activities can positively complement and strengthen government fisheries management strategies and result in positive changes both in fishing practices and in the water.^{2,4,5,10} Some studies have suggested that FIP success seems to be limited by governments’ ability to improve management,^{4,11} although other studies have not concluded such a strong link between government status and the effectiveness of FIPs.^{4,10} Additionally, there is emerging evidence that FIPs will require a longer timeframe to achieve progress than previously suggested. Travaille et al. 2019,¹⁰ found that a 10 year minimum engagement may be required for MSC certification. Research suggests that there is room for improvements in the FIP methodology, for example a need to increase fishers’ participation in FIPs,⁵ and to better consider contextual social and ecological

differences within fisheries, especially in small-scale fisheries settings.¹²⁻¹⁴ In conclusion, more research is needed on when, where, and how FIPs can be most successful.^{5,10-12}

Increased engagement in FIPs by seafood buyers

There is an opportunity for the seafood supply chain, particularly seafood buyers, to encourage FIP progress and effectiveness moving forward. CEA's 2020 review of FIPs found that seafood buyer engagement is essential in creating the demand for sustainable seafood, and driving FIP formation and progress. Major buyers can do more to support FIPs and the sustainable seafood movement by creating a public commitment to FIPs, making good progress, for example, sourcing from A to C rated FIPs; asking their suppliers to participate in FIPs as influential stakeholders, asking suppliers for verification of FIP product, providing financial support to FIPs, visiting FisheryProgress to review FIP progress, and communicating with FIPs that have stalled or slowed their progress. Supply chain roundtables can be a venue for making these types of public commitments. They can provide a forum for processors, importers, and others that buy directly from a specific seafood sector to work together in a pre-competitive environment to achieve improvements in fisheries or aquaculture. In this way buyers can provide longer term engagement.

Beyond ecological impacts – social issues are of growing importance

More FIPs are expanding their priorities to include equity and human rights perspectives.⁴ The

Conservation Alliance now encourages all FIPs to address social issues, such as human rights abuses, labor issues, and community impacts - and nearly one in five FIPs on FisheryProgress are self-reporting on human well-being dimensions of fisheries.⁴ FisheryProgress released an Interim Policy on Forced Labor, Child Labor, or Human Trafficking for FisheryProgress FIPs^x in 2019 and are currently developing an interim social policy^x. In addition, the Social Responsibility Assessment Tool for the Seafood Sector is one example of a tool to assess risk of social issues within FIPs (Conservation Alliance 2019). CEA (2020) found that some FIP implementers identify social risks and work to mitigate them, in order to access and sell to a specific buyer or market; while other implementers address social issues as a means to create additional values for fishers, their communities, and local companies which, in turn, can stimulate environmental progress through new incentives. Whatever the reason for addressing human well-being through FIP implementation, it is well recognized that fisheries are inextricably linked to facets of human well-being such as food and nutritional security, employment, and economic and community development, and that future FIP implementation should consider implications on these facets.⁴

^x [FisheryProgress Interim Policy on Forced Labor, Child Labor, or Human Trafficking](#)

^x [FisheryProgress Social Policy](#)

[CEA Consulting. "2020 Global Landscape Review of Fishery Improvement Projects"](#)

[The Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions Social Responsibility Resources](#)

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