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BRIEF REPORT



IFISH6: Successes and Lessons for the Future

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ABSTRACT

The IFISH6 conference brought together researchers and practitioners from around the world to discuss innovations and progress in protecting the safety and health of workers in the fishing, aquaculture, and seafood processing industries. This brief provides an overview of the feedback that was received about this conference, ideas for enhancing the impact of IFISH7, and methods of continuing collaboration and innovation in between.

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Introduction

In January 2024, the 6th International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference (IFISH6) took place at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations Headquarters in Rome, Italy. The 5-day conference brought together 166 researchers and practitioners from 31 countries to discuss key health and safety issues impacting workers in the fishing, aquaculture, and seafood processing industries worldwide.

Over the course of the conference, participants were exposed to a range of activities, including six plenary sessions, six workshops, nine panel discussions, 16 abstract sessions highlighting 64 individual presentations, one roundtable discussion, a poster session highlighting 14 projects, and four networking events. Panels, roundtables, abstract sessions, and most workshops were conducted concurrently, three at a time. Main conference sessions were held mid-week, while the first and last day included pre- and post-conference workshops.



This brief report focuses on participant feedback about IFISH6, as well as recommendations for IFISH7, which is set to take place in 2027. Recommendations for connecting IFISH participants and other fisheries safety and health researchers between conferences are also discussed. To be


consistent with the language used by the majority of researchers in these fields, when referring to those working in the fishing, aquaculture, and seafood processing industries, the term “fishers” will be used throughout this report.

Methods

IFISH6 participants were invited to engage in an electronic evaluation survey. This survey, which was hosted on Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap),¹ was made available to participants via a QR code displayed at the conference venue as well as an emailed link after the conclusion of IFISH6. The decision to post a QR code linking to the survey was made in order to allow participants to note their thoughts and ideas as they came up rather than retrospectively.

The survey focused around three main areas: (1) reflections about IFISH6, (2) ideas about continued collaboration and plans for IFISH7, and (3) opinions about the challenges faced by the commercial fishing, aquaculture, and seafood processing industries and how to collaboratively address those issues. Questions related to the third focus area have already been assessed and documented by the FAO Committee on Fisheries² and thus, will not be discussed here.

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With few exceptions (e.g., “are you interested in partnering with us for IFISH7?”), questions called for open-ended, free text responses. Data was exported from REDCap into NVivo14³ for analysis. Free text responses were coded inductively and like codes were categorized together. Responses to multiple choice questions and similar one-word response questions were simply tallied.

Results

There were 66 IFISH participants who responded to the survey request (response rate = 40%).

Evaluation of IFISH6 and planning for IFISH7

Of respondents, 85% ($n = 56$) indicated the conference met or mostly met its objective. Of those who did not explicitly agree, five indicated it was too early to tell, but there was promise. Only two individuals believed the conference did not meet its objective.

The feedback provided about IFISH6 was overwhelmingly positive. Of particular note, respondents appreciated the wide range of participants present and engaged at the conference. This included having individuals from many different countries and regions, as well as a range of professional backgrounds, some of which are not normally engaged in fishing safety and health work (e.g., clinicians).

In addition to positive feedback regarding conference participants, many also indicated they were impressed by the variety of topics and methods presented at the conference and the various forums used to share information. Panel discussions and workshops were called out as immensely important for giving individuals an opportunity to network and share ideas beyond those formally presented. As one participant noted,

Learning what people are struggling with and how people are finding solutions is a powerful tool. The smaller breakout sessions were some of the most powerful sessions in this regard. Getting the chance to hear different perspectives and experiences helped to bring meaning to the objective or introduce potential obstacles to explore.

Though feedback on IFISH6 was largely positive, participants did indicate areas in which further

improvements could be made. Some of this feedback included an emphasis on further engagement from diverse groups, including fishers and their families, maritime academies, and regulators and policy makers. Of particular note, participants believed hearing from fishers is important in understanding the impact and feasibility of various safety and health innovations. Further, they believed including policy makers in IFISH conferences would allow them to hear first hand about potential solutions and increase the likelihood of appropriate policy advancements. More generally, participants thought it would be valuable to hear more from Asian, African, South American, and developing countries, among others, at the next IFISH.

In addition to recommendations for who should be in the room, participants wanted to hear more about specific topics, including seafood processing, policy, emerging issues, small scale fisheries, and health (versus safety). Participants also wanted to see more data and evidence indicating the impact of various programs and interventions. This included, as mentioned, evidence from fishers themselves. Finally, many articulated a desire for more time for discussions, Q&A sessions, and general networking.

Beyond IFISH

IFISH6 appeared to be a worthwhile experience for all involved and laid the groundwork for successful collaborations moving forward. Participants left the conference feeling energized and looking for modes of communication between conferences. In particular, participants called for a range of web-based platforms to continue learning, networking, and collaborating. These included traditional email listservs, social media, communication platforms (e.g., WhatsApp), webinars, e-newsletters, virtual meetings, and a database of resources. In addition, participants called for smaller meetings and conferences to be held in-between IFISH conferences that would allow them to connect more regularly with one another. By doing this, participants believed they would be more readily able to connect with, and collaborate with, others working on similar issues, thus providing an opportunity to more broadly impact the safety and health of workers. This was

noted by one individual as, “*an excellent way to continue our collective missions.*”

Conclusions

IFISH6 proved to be an important and well-received event for safety and health experts to connect and learn from one another, with ample momentum to continue conversations in the coming months and years. Both the conference itself and the evaluations have provided a foundation for continued collaborations among fisheries researchers and practitioners. In particular, IFISH attendees and others who are interested can look forward to both new and continued ways to engage with one another. This includes continuation of the International PFD Work Group,⁴ a web-based discussion group that meets quarterly and was born from IFISH5, as well as the IFISH Listserv. In addition, IFISH6 organizers are currently working to fund and develop an Innovation Exchange platform, which would facilitate increased collaboration between IFISH conferences. Finally, though several years in advance, planning for IFISH7 has already begun. Anyone who has feedback or ideas to enhance these activities, or who would like to be involved in their implementation should reach out to the IFISH6 planning committee or the authors of this report.

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