

Second Ad Hoc Open Ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics
submitted by FAO
3-7 December 2018

Background

1. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) considers the issue of marine litter and microplastics from the perspectives of i) reducing marine litter that originates from the fishing industry, in particular abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG); ii) assessing the ecological impact of microplastics on fisheries resources and aquaculture products; and; iv) assessing food safety risks from marine litter, in particular microplastics, on human health.
2. FAO collaborates with many organisations, including relevant UN Agencies and Programmes, NGOs and academic institutions in addressing and building knowledge on marine litter and microplastics, including; UNEP and the Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GPML), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES), the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) and the Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI).

Recent work of FAO on Marine Litter and Microplastics

ALDFG

3. In July 2018, the Thirty-third Session of FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI33), endorsed FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for the Marking of Fishing Gear (VGMFG). These Voluntary Guidelines include not only guidance on gear marking systems but also provisions relating to associated measures such as retrieval of lost gear, reporting of ALDFG and disposal of end-of-life gear. The VGMFG are considered to be an important tool in preventing and reducing ALDFG and ghost-fishing, and in combatting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The VGMFG compliment FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.
4. The VGMFG should be considered in the context of broader fisheries management measures. A system for the marking of fishing gear, when implemented correctly, should inter alia, provide a simple, pragmatic, affordable and verifiable means of identifying the ownership and position of fishing gear, and its link with the vessel(s) and/or operator(s) undertaking the fishing operations.
5. FAO is in the process of publishing the VGMFG. The information paper containing the VGMFG, as endorsed by COFI can be found on the COFI33 website¹.
6. COFI33 also
 - 6.1. supported the development of a comprehensive global strategy to tackle issues relating to ALDFG and to support implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines;
 - 6.2. encouraged the involvement of small-scale fisheries and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations or Arrangements and other relevant international bodies; and
 - 6.3. encouraged FAO to continue its work to collect information on the impacts of pollution, including microplastics, on aquaculture and fisheries resources.
7. FAO is now in the process of developing a global programme to support responsible practices for sustainable fisheries and reduce impacts of fishing operations on ecosystems. This global programme will support the implementation of the VGMFG and other measures to prevent and reduce ALDFG.

¹<http://www.fao.org/3/MX136EN/mx136en.pdf>

Microplastics

8. Based on the work of the GESAMP Working Group 40 on microplastics, FAO organized, with the support from UNEP and the Government of Norway, both a study and an expert workshop on microplastics in fisheries and aquaculture. This study and the workshop resulted in the publication of a 2017 Technical Paper² that reviewed the status of knowledge on microplastics in fisheries and aquaculture, and implications for aquatic organisms and food safety.
9. FAO is now working to build upon the information contained in the 2017 Technical Paper and using this data to develop appropriate risk profiling tools to assess food safety impacts of microplastic pollution.

EAF-NANSEN Programme

10. FAO is also conducting research on marine litter and microplastics through our EAF-NANSEN programme funded by the Government of Norway. The R/V Fridtjof Nansen is able to collect data and information in areas that have not previously been monitored (off Western Africa, Eastern Africa, Indian Ocean) and in countries where there is still a significant need to raise awareness on this topic. The marine litter component of this programme is currently being strengthened to increase the analysis of samples and to develop knowledge products which will enhance knowledge on sources, distributions and potential impacts.

Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP)

11. FAO recognizes the role of GESAMP as an independent group of experts tasked to advise the United Nations system on the scientific aspects of marine pollution and environmental protection.
12. In particular FAO welcomes the work carried out to-date of GESAMP Working Group 40 on sources, fate and effects of plastics and microplastics in the marine environment.
13. At the recent 45TH Session of GESAMP, which took place at FAO Headquarters in Rome in September 2018, FAO proposed the establishment of a new GESAMP Working Group on sea-based sources of marine litter, which was broadly supported by GESAMP members. FAO looks forward to developing the Terms of Reference for this Working Group which would also take into account the relevant work of other UN Agencies, in particular the recently adopted IMO Action Plan to Address Marine Plastic Litter from Ships.

Related areas of work: addressing soil pollution from plastics

14. In addition to FAO's work on marine litter, FAO's Global Soil Partnership is also looking at plastic pollution from the perspective of terrestrial ecosystems and in particular soil health. Plastics present in soils affect the normal functioning of these systems and may enter the food chain.
15. In May 2018, the Global Soil Partnership and the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, together with UN Environment, World Health Organization and the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions Secretariat, organized the Global Symposium on Soil Pollution³. The problem of plastics in soils was identified as one of the main problems for which more information is required.

²<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7677e.pdf>

³<http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/global-symposium-on-soil-pollution/en/>

16. FAO is currently working on a report on the Global Status and Regional Trends of Soil Pollution which will be a contribution to the UNEA3 resolution on soil pollution.
17. FAO will mark World Soil Day⁴ on 5 December with the launch of a public campaign “be the solution to soil pollution” which will address the plastic issue and encourage reduction in the use of plastics and improvements in waste management^{5 6}.

⁴<http://www.fao.org/world-soil-day/en/>

⁵<http://www.fao.org/3/CA1776EN/ca1776en.pdf>

⁶<http://www.fao.org/world-soil-day/campaign-materials/en/#c631710>