

Key Outcomes From the 14th SPRFMO Commission Meeting

By Delice Pinkard - Compliance and Enforcement Manager



Delegates from fishing nations across the globe converged on the vibrant city of Panama City, Panama, from 24 February to 6 March 2026 for the 14th SPRFMO Commission Meeting, and Belize had a seat at that table.

For those unfamiliar with the world of international fisheries, the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) is one of the key bodies that governs how fish stocks in the South Pacific Ocean are managed and shared among nations. Think of it as the rulebook that keeps the ocean's resources from being overexploited, and the Commission meeting as the annual gathering where those rules are written, revised, and debated. This year, all eyes were on one species in particular: **Jack Mackerel (JM)**

Jack Mackerel may not be a household name in Belize, but in the waters of the South Pacific, it is one of the most commercially significant species under SPRFMO's watch. This year's Commission meeting was dominated by a single pressing question; how much Jack Mackerel can responsibly be caught? The Scientific Committee, tasked with answering that very question, found itself unable to reach a clear consensus, and that tension set the tone for much of the meeting.

The Committee did offer an interim recommendation, a TAC range of **1.64 to 1.79 million tonnes**, a level considered sufficient to keep the stock healthy and above what scientists call the **Biomass at Maximum**

Sustainable Yield (BMSY). In simple terms, this is the sweet spot where enough fish remain in the ocean to keep reproducing while still allowing for a healthy harvest. However, there was a catch, quite literally. Despite the stock appearing healthy on paper, fishers were catching far less per trip in



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the northern waters off Chile, suggesting that something more complex was happening beneath the surface. This inconsistency between the science and real-world fishing conditions underscored a growing concern: the tools being used to assess the stock may not be telling the full story.



Figure 8 Belize Delegation alongside Industry representatives

Additional red flags emerged during discussions, gaps in data reporting, insufficient observer coverage at sea, and the growing shadow of climate change altering fish behaviour and distribution in ways that current models are not yet fully equipped to capture. Members agreed that the status quo was not good enough and committed to accelerating the development of a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE), essentially a more sophisticated and responsive management system for Jack Mackerel.

On the decisions side, eight of nineteen proposed Conservation and Management Measures were adopted, including the landmark CMM 01-2026. This measure sets a new TAC of 1,531,071 tonnes and introduces a practical 'borrow and banking' provision,

allowing nations to carry forward up to 15,000 unused tonnes into the following year, offering greater flexibility for countries like Belize that are rebuilding their operational presence in the fishery.

Belize's delegation did not come to Panama City merely as observers. We came with purpose. Belize received a modest but meaningful 8% increase in its JM quota, rising from 1,646 to 1,775 tonnes for 2026, a step in the right direction, even if there is still significant ground to cover. More importantly, Belize once again formally advocated for the reinstatement of its historical JM quota allocation, a matter that speaks directly to the country's long-term fishing rights and economic interests in the region. That advocacy will continue through a formal proposal at the next Commission meeting.

For a deeper look at **why** this reinstatement matters so much and the history behind Belize's relationship with SPRFMO be sure to read the accompanying feature article in this edition by Ernie Howe, Fisheries Officer.

Looking ahead, Belize will be present at the 14th Scientific Committee meeting in the Faroe Islands (5–12 September 2026), and the next Commission meeting is set for Brussels, Belgium, in February 2027. The work continues, and so does Belize's voice.

"Diplomacy at sea starts long before anyone casts a line, it begins in rooms like Panama City where preparation and persistence determine who gets to fish"



Measuring Emissions: Advancing Climate Action in Belize's High Seas Fisheries

By: Charles Coc – Fisheries Scientist and Data Officer

On 12-13 March 2026, the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit (BHSFU) participated in the National Workshop on Enhanced Statistics for Evidence-Based Climate Action in Maritime Trade, Transport and Fisheries, held in Belize City. The workshop brought together key national and international partners, including the Ministry of Blue Economy & Marine Conservation, the Statistical Institute of Belize, the Belize Port Authority, and United Nation agencies, to strengthen Belize's capacity to measure



Figure 1: Participants of the national climate action workshop held in Belize City, March 2026.

greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across maritime sectors.

A key message from the workshop was clear: while maritime transport is essential to global trade and food security, it is also a significant contributor to climate change through GHG emissions, particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂) from fuel use. As Belize continues advancing its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement, there is a growing opportunity to better understand how the fishing sector, particularly

high seas operations, fits into the country's climate mitigation efforts. For the BHSFU, this discussion is highly relevant as Belize currently manages a fleet of high seas fishing vessels, which operate across international waters and contribute to national economic activity, food supply chains, and international fishing governance.

A key challenge identified was the lack of sector-specific emissions data for fishing fleets within national greenhouse gas inventories, an area where the BHSFU can play a pivotal role. By leveraging existing data sources such as vessel registries, logbooks, VMS, AIS tracking, and fuel-use records, Belize can begin building a fisheries emissions baseline for its high seas fleet. This would strengthen national climate reporting while positioning Belize to access technical assistance, climate finance, and decarbonisation partnerships.

Going forward, collaboration among national agencies and international partners to integrate emissions reporting into fisheries data systems will be essential, ensuring Belize's high seas fisheries remain aligned with sustainable ocean governance and evidence-based climate action.



Figure 2: Participants listening to presentations on emissions reporting and fisheries data systems.

Belize's Journey to Reclaim its Jack Mackerel Legacy

By: Ernie Howe – Fisheries Officer

There is something quietly significant about a small nation like Belize having a stake in one of the world's most expansive ocean fisheries. The South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) governs the sustainable use of fishery resources across the South Pacific Ocean, regulating key species such as Jack Mackerel (JM), jumbo flying squid, and deep-sea species associated with seamounts. What many may not know is that Belize was not a latecomer to this organisation — **Belize was there from the very beginning.**

As a founding Contracting Party, Belize issued its Instrument of Accession on 11 April 2011 and operated an active fleet of approximately nine vessels in the convention area, targeting Jack Mackerel, Chub Mackerel, Horse Mackerel, Alfonsino, and Orange Roughy, with documented fishing activity dating as far back as 2001. However, in May 2016, Belize made the strategic decision to withdraw from SPRFMO to redirect its focus toward RFMOs more geographically aligned with its interests; namely ICCAT and IATTC. While that decision was sound at the time, it came at a cost: Belize forfeited its historical JM quota and its established presence in the South Pacific fishery.



Figure 1. Chilean Jack Mackerel (Photo Marine Stewardship Council)

When Belize rejoined SPRFMO in 2023, it returned not as a founding member with restored rights, but as a new entrant, allocated just 1,100 metric tons of JM quota. As reported in this edition's Commission meeting summary, that figure has since grown to 1,775 metric tons following an 8% increase approved in Panama City earlier this year. Progress, yes — but still a fraction of what Belize's historical allocation would represent. Reinstating those historical rights would meaningfully expand fishing opportunities for Belize.

Achieving that reinstatement will require more than good intentions, it demands a sustained, evidence-based strategy. A formal JM proposal must be submitted annually at each Commission meeting to keep Belize's request active and credible. Equally important is active engagement with the Jack Mackerel Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE), the scientific framework that will shape how future quotas are determined and allocated. The upcoming 14th Scientific Committee meeting in the Faroe Islands (September 2026) will be pivotal in advancing this process, and BHSFU's attendance is essential.



Understanding the science is not optional, it is the foundation of building a proposal that is both compelling and credible.

Belize's case carries weight. As a founding member, Belize helped shape the very framework now governing this fishery. Its temporary departure should not permanently erase the rights it helped establish. With consistent advocacy, informed participation, and well-prepared proposals, Belize has a clear and legitimate path forward, one worth pursuing with purpose.

Introducing CLS as Our New VMS Service Provider: A Step Forward in Fisheries Monitoring

By: Ian Constantino – Monitoring Officer

When a fishing vessel sets out into the open ocean, sometimes thousands of miles from shore, the ability to know where it is, what it is doing, and whether it is operating within the rules is not just a technical requirement. It is the backbone of responsible fisheries management. That is precisely what a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) provides, a satellite-based tracking tool that monitors the location, movement, and activity of fishing vessels in near real time, transmitting position data automatically at regular intervals.

For Belize, maintaining a reliable and current VMS capability is a direct reflection of our commitment to responsible flag State stewardship and our ongoing fight against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. It keeps our vessels accountable, supports coordinated enforcement across member

states, and upholds the conservation and management measures we have committed to, both nationally and through our RFMO obligations.



After more than 10 years of dependable service from Polestar, the time has come to take the next step. Following a thorough evaluation of our evolving operational needs and the growing demands of modern fisheries management, Belize has made the strategic decision to transition to CLS as its new VMS provider. This was not a change made lightly; it was a deliberate move toward a system that better serves where we are headed.

What makes CLS stand out is its use of the Iridium satellite network, a constellation of low Earth orbit (LEO) satellites delivering truly global, pole-to-pole coverage. Even in the most remote stretches of ocean, where other systems struggle, CLS maintains



continuous and reliable communication. Vessel positions, activity data, and electronic catch information are all transmitted in near real time, keeping our monitoring capabilities sharp and our compliance record clean across all relevant RFMO frameworks.

Beyond the satellite infrastructure, CLS brings real, practical improvements that vessel operators will appreciate. Onboard tablets allow fishers to input catch data directly and simply — reducing paperwork, improving accuracy, and making compliance feel less like a burden and more like a natural part of the workflow. Many vessels already have CLS-compatible equipment on board, which means the transition will be smoother than expected for a significant number of operators. The system is also widely recognised across multiple RFMOs, and over time, it presents meaningful cost efficiencies that make it a smart long-term investment.

This transition is more than an upgrade; it is a statement of intent. As Belize continues to strengthen its presence in high-seas fisheries, having a monitoring system that is reliable, modern, and internationally recognised is not optional. It is essential. We move forward with CLS confident that our capabilities are aligned with international best practices and ready for the demands ahead.

BHSFU Strengthens International Ties During Taiwan Mission

The Director of High Seas Fisheries, Mrs. Valarie Lanza represented the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit (BHSFU) as part of a high-level Financial Services Mission to Taiwan in March 2026, joining a Belizean delegation aimed at deepening bilateral cooperation under the Belize–Taiwan Economic Cooperation Agreement (ECA).



While the mission's primary focus was on financial services, the BHSFU seized the opportunity to advance its own strategic interests on the international stage. A dedicated meeting was held with the **Taiwan Fisheries Agency**, where both sides engaged in open dialogue on matters of mutual interest, particularly issues relevant to Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs). Taiwan officials also expressed keen interest in Belize's ongoing Electronic Monitoring System (EMS) project, recognizing it as a meaningful step forward in responsible and transparent fisheries management.





Taiwan Fisheries Agency

An equally valuable engagement during the mission was a meeting with Belize's Deputy Registrar based in Taiwan. This meeting provided an important opportunity to discuss matters directly relevant to high seas fisheries operations and administration, while also allowing the BHSFU to listen to and document concerns raised by the Deputy Registrar's office; feedback that will be valuable in informing the Unit's ongoing efforts to improve service delivery and regulatory oversight.

Port Bureau, the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs, among others. The BHSFU was further invited to deliver a presentation at the **Belize-Taiwan Financial Services Information Seminar**, providing an excellent platform to showcase the Unit's work and mandate to an international audience.



Belize Delegation to Taiwan- Embassy of Belize in Taiwan, Financial Services Commission, Finance Belize, Belize Companies and Corporate Affairs Registry



Deputy Registrar, Taiwan, Ms. Zhang Xin (Center), Valarie Lanza, Director of High Seas Fisheries (left), and Felicia Vargas, Director of Registration Services, IMMARBEL (Right)

The mission proved highly productive, allowing the BHSFU to build and strengthen relationships with key regional and international partners, raise the profile of Belize's high seas fisheries governance, and explore areas for future cooperation.

The Director of High Seas Fisheries also participated in a broader series of high-level meetings with Taiwanese counterparts, including the **Maritime and**



FROM THE EDITOR



Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 29th Edition of **The Quarterly Catch!**

As we move further into 2026, it is clear that this continues to be a busy and

rewarding year for the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit. From the meeting rooms of Panama City to the boardrooms of Taipei, our team has been actively representing Belize's interests on the international stage, and this edition reflects just that.

In this issue, you read about Belize's participation in the **14th SPRFMO Commission Meeting** in Panama City, where critical decisions were made around the management of Jack Mackerel in the South Pacific. The feature on the BHSFU's engagement during the **Belize-Taiwan Financial Services Mission**, highlights productive discussions with the Taiwan Fisheries Agency, our Deputy Registrar, and even an opportunity to present the work of the BHSFU to an international audience.

These engagements remind us that high seas fisheries governance is not confined to any one ocean or meeting room. Our work requires us to be present, engaged, and vocal wherever decisions that affect Belize's fishing interests are being made.

To our stakeholders, partners, and readers, thank you for your continued support. We hope you find this edition both informative and inspiring.

Until next time, tight lines and fair sea

Warm regards,

Editor, The Quarterly Catch

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