

In Panama, Global Fishing Watch calls for vessel ownership transparency

Advancing transparency could expose hidden actors behind illegal fishing and strengthen ocean governance, says Michele Kuruc

PANAMA CITY, PANAMA, March 3, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) plays a vital role in safeguarding one of the largest and most important areas of the global ocean. Its mandate spans nearly a quarter of the world's high seas and its decisions help shape the future of fisheries, ecosystems and communities throughout the Pacific.

But as members of SPRFMO gather in Panama this week for the 14th Meeting of the SPRFMO Commission, [transparency](#) must be at the center of their discussions.

The ocean and its fisheries are foundational to the global economy and its food systems. More than 3 billion people around the world rely on wild-caught seafood for 20 percent of their protein. And globally, the commercial fishing industry generates \$141 billion each year.

Yet, determining who actually profits from fishing activities is often a challenge, hindered by opaque ownership structures behind which bad actors can hide. Indeed, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing often thrives in the shadows of these complex ownership structures, giving rise to a lawless ocean where sea slavers, pirate fishers and polluters can operate with relative impunity.

That's why Global Fishing Watch is attending this year's SPRFMO with a firm call for Member States to require the disclosure of vessels' [ultimate beneficial owners \(UBO\)](#) — those who control and ultimately benefit from a vessel's activities — so we can bring the hidden actors into full view.

Strengthening UBO transparency in the SPRFMO Record of Vessels, including requiring the name and address of beneficial owners under Conservation and Management Measure 05-2023, would help lay the groundwork for international best practices in fisheries and close critical enforcement gaps. Such ownership transparency will make it harder for bad actors to evade sanctions by changing flags, companies or identities and make it easier to hold them accountable

At the same time, we recognize that transparency at sea is also critically essential. [Vessel tracking](#) remains a cornerstone of effective fisheries management. By incorporating automatic identification systems (AIS) alongside vessel monitoring systems (VMS), SPRFMO Member States would strengthen oversight and support compliance with SPRFMO measures. Requiring AIS use before and after transshipment events, and for vessels engaged in squid fishing, would help ensure that vessel movements are visible, verifiable and accountable. Transparency through vessel tracking deters illegal activity and builds trust in management systems.

And, finally, we call on Member States to ensure that data be accessible and actionable. Improving the harmonization, reporting and public availability of vessel and fishing activity data will empower authorities across SPRFMO countries to monitor compliance and respond effectively to violations. Public tools, including the Global Fishing Watch map, can help transform data into insights and support stronger monitoring, control and surveillance.

We cannot manage what we cannot see. And when transparency increases, accountability follows. At Global Fishing Watch, our mission is to make human activity at sea visible so that science, policy and enforcement can work together to protect our shared ocean. We stand ready to collaborate with SPRFMO Members and Cooperating Non-Contracting Parties to advance transparency, strengthen accountability and ensure sustainable fisheries for generations to come.

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