Global Fishing Watch launches first global blueprint to help governments strengthen vessel tracking

The comprehensive guide offers more than 70 practical recommendations to leverage ocean transparency for better ocean governance

ROME, ITALY, September 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Global Fishing Watch, the international nonprofit advancing ocean governance through transparency of human activity at sea, today launched the Vessel Tracking Best Practices Guide — the first comprehensive framework designed to help governments strengthen vessel tracking systems, improve fisheries governance and combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

> Our Guide advances a global conversation about greater harmonization of vessel tracking and recognizes that shared approaches can make cooperation, transparency and enforcement far more effective.
>
> *Michele Kuruc*

Unveiled by María Soledad Tapia, national director of the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Service of Chile, at the 37th Session of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's Committee on Fisheries (COFI), held in Rome, Italy, the guide provides governments and the fisheries sector with more than 70 practical recommendations for designing, operating and modernizing vessel tracking systems and bolstering ocean transparency efforts.

According to Global Fishing Watch research, roughly 75 percent of the world's industrial fishing vessels are not publicly tracked through the automatic identification system (AIS). And while tracking technology such as the vessel monitoring system (VMS) has existed for decades, there is still no internationally recognized standard indicating how governments should use it. National approaches vary widely, creating gaps in effective monitoring, interoperability and enforcement and leading to a global system of vessel monitoring that remains fractured and disjointed.

"The Vessel Tracking Best Practices Guide does more than help strengthen national systems," said Michele Kuruc, interim co-chief policy and program officer at Global Fishing Watch. "By identifying best practices, it advances a global conversation about greater harmonization of vessel tracking and recognizes that shared approaches can make cooperation, transparency and

enforcement far more effective."

Developed from years of global operations, expert contributions and Global Fishing Watch's vast experience actively monitoring more than 120,000 vessels worldwide, the guide offers a roadmap for governments seeking to strengthen existing systems without starting from scratch.

"Vessels operate across maritime boundaries, but the regulatory requirements for tracking them remain largely fragmented. That creates operational bottlenecks — gaps in information precisely where cooperation is most important," Kuruc continued. "This guide gives governments a common foundation for strengthening their own systems while opening the door to greater alignment internationally. More consistent standards would make it easier to share data, strengthen oversight and ensure that vessels cannot exploit the gaps between jurisdictions."

A "critical framework" for vessel tracking and ocean governance

At its core, the new guide calls for a fundamental shift in how governments approach vessel tracking: from simply tracking vessels to building integrated systems that strengthen fisheries management, transparency and enforcement. Indeed, the guide underscores the need for a greater integration of AIS and VMS — the two principal technologies used to monitor fishing vessels.

Developed primarily as a safety and collision-avoidance system, AIS openly broadcasts information about a vessel's identity, position, speed and course — and it is used by many large ships, including commercial fishing vessels. In contrast, VMS, which was designed specifically for fisheries management and regulatory oversight, has historically transmitted data through restricted channels.

Rather than treating AIS and VMS as competing technologies, the guide recommends using both systems together, allowing authorities to cross-reference vessel identities and positions, identify inconsistencies and build a more complete and reliable picture of activity at sea. Moreover, for governments already operating VMS programs, integrating AIS can also provide a cost-effective way to expand tracking coverage and improve data quality without duplicating existing infrastructure.

For Charles Kilgour, director of program initiatives at Global Fishing Watch, the value of vessel tracking extends well beyond fisheries enforcement. He notes that tracking data can support maritime security and search and rescue operations, help governments manage marine protected areas, strengthen seafood traceability and provide critical insights for labor, climate and biodiversity initiatives.

"Effective vessel tracking isn't simply about putting a device on a vessel and watching a dot move across a map," Kilgour said. "It requires the technology, data, laws, financing and people behind

those systems to work together. This guide gives governments a critical framework to make that transition, turning vessel tracking from a basic monitoring requirement into a powerful tool for greater ocean transparency and better ocean governance."

Key recommendations for a new era in vessel tracking

The Vessel Tracking Best Practices Guide follows the full lifecycle of a vessel tracking system — from establishing its purpose and technical architecture to securing sustainable financing and ensuring tracking data can support enforcement and withstand scrutiny in court. Its more than 70 recommendations cover:

Modern vessel tracking architecture
Sustainable financing models
Transparency and interoperability
Legal frameworks that enable successful prosecution
Integration of AIS and VMS
Artificial intelligence and automated analytics
Regional and international cooperation

Among its technical recommendations, the guide calls for updating VMS requirements so vessel positions are recorded every one to 15 minutes, rather than relying on traditional intervals of one to two hours or longer. Higher-frequency data can help authorities detect short-lived events, including fishing activity, transshipments and incursions into closed areas, that might otherwise be missed. Meanwhile, to help manage satellite communication costs, the guide recommends separating how frequently positions are recorded onboard from how frequently that information is transmitted to shore.

The guide also sets out a phased pathway that allows governments to strengthen tracking capabilities over time. The recommendations note that countries can begin with reliable vessel identification, secure data collection and basic mapping; progress toward integrated AIS and VMS analysis and automated event detection; and ultimately deploy more advanced machine learning and artificial intelligence to identify complex vessel behavior and anomalies.

In addition, the guide underscores the importance of transparency as it urges governments to make key information — from vessel identities and ownership to tracking data and compliance records — accessible to relevant stakeholders, helping strengthen accountability and cooperation across jurisdictions.

Building toward common global standards

Beyond strengthening individual national systems, the guide also addresses the patchwork of vessel tracking requirements that exists across jurisdictions, defining it as a fundamental weakness of the current global tracking infrastructure.

It emphasizes how greater alignment around common standards could make it easier for governments to exchange data, meet regional and international obligations and cooperate when vessels move between jurisdictions. It could also help countries extract greater value from tracking information they already collect.

“Vessel tracking has enormous potential, but we will only realize its full value when systems can work together across borders,” Kuruc added. “Common standards can help turn today's fragmented landscape into a more connected global system that gives governments better information, strengthens accountability and makes it harder for illegal activity to disappear between jurisdictions.”

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