

IATTC – AIDCP

2nd Informal Consultation between The IATTC Committee on Administration and Finance (CAF) and the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Financial Strengthening of the AIDCP (WGFSa)

2:00 – 6:00 pm (Pacific time)
(Virtual format)

20 – 21 May 2026

Request from the Joint Working Group CAF-WGFSa

The staff of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) has prepared this document in response to a request from the Joint Working Group of the IATTC Committee on Administration and Finance (CAF) and the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Financial Strengthening of the AIDCP (WGFSa).

The document prepared in response to the request:

9. *Request the Secretariat investigate and prepare an analysis of the cost-sharing used by the WCPFC, IOTC, and ICCAT with a comparability analysis on the use of the IATTC observer program*

1. Background and Purpose

At the January 2026 Informal Consultation Meeting between the IATTC Committee on Administration and Finance (CAF) and the Ad Hoc Working Group on Financial Strengthening of the AIDCP, participants requested that the Secretariat investigate and prepare an analysis of the observer program cost-sharing mechanisms used by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), with a comparability analysis relative to the IATTC observer program.

To obtain current information, the IATTC Secretariat contacted the Secretariats of all four organizations in February–March 2026 and posed a standard set of questions covering: (1) observer coverage levels; (2) how coverage is achieved; (3) the role of the Secretariat beyond data receipt; and (4) cost-sharing or cost-recovery mechanisms in place at the commission level. Responses were received from all four organizations. This paper presents a summary of those responses and a comparative analysis with IATTC’s own arrangements.

2. Observer Coverage Requirements

The following table summarizes the observer coverage requirements applicable in each organization’s convention area. Coverage requirements provide important context for understanding the scale and cost of observer programs.

RFMO	Purse Seine	Longline	Transshipment
IATTC	100% (Class 6 vessels); no requirement for smaller vessels (Classes 1–5)	5% minimum (vessels ≥ 20 m LOA)	100%
WCPFC	100% (20°N–20°S); 20% outside tropical zone	5% minimum (non-PS vessels)	100%
IOTC	5% (vessels ≥ 24 m, or < 24 m fishing outside EEZ)	5% (vessels ≥ 24 m, or < 24 m fishing outside EEZ)	100%
ICCAT	5% general; 100% BFT purse seiners	5% general; 10% tropical tunas (≥ 20 m); 20% BFT vessels (> 15 m)	100%

RFMO	Purse Seine	Longline	Transshipment
CCSBT	10%	10%	100%

Several observations follow from this comparison. IATTC, WCPFC, and ICCAT all require 100% observer coverage on large purse-seine vessels, while CCSBT sets a 10% target for all SBT fisheries and IOTC has a minimum coverage level of 5%. All five organizations require 100% observer coverage on carrier vessels conducting at-sea transshipment. Minimum longline coverage requirements are largely consistent at 5% across IATTC, WCPFC, and IOTC, though ICCAT requires 10% for tropical tuna longline vessels and CCSBT requires 10% for SBT fisheries specifically.

3. Observer Remuneration

The following table summarizes available information on observer daily rates across the five organizations. Compensation varies considerably depending on whether observers are employed through national programs, sub-regional arrangements, or contracted through third-party providers such as MRAG. It should be noted that rates paid to third-party contractors reflect the full invoice rate, which includes not only observer compensation but also costs associated with insurance, equipment, communications, management, and logistical support; actual observer take-home pay is generally lower than these figures suggest.

RFMO	National / Regional Observer Rates	Third-Party Contracted Rates
IATTC	USD 58–65/day (purse seine, varies by experience and data quality). Longline observer rates in the EPO are not known to the IATTC Secretariat.	Transshipment (MRAG Americas Pacific): USD 190–265/day at sea. US national observers range from USD 215.54/day (entry, 0–60 days) to USD 265/day (1,000+ days); non-US nationals from USD 190/day to USD 237/day.
WCPFC	Rates vary widely by program: approximately USD 50–300/day. Most purse-seine trips in the WCPO are covered by FFA/PNA observers at approximately USD 90–110/day; rates are slightly higher for observers using electronic tablets.	—
IOTC	Not specified.	MRAG/CapFish (transshipment): USD 220/day at sea and USD 315/day during travel. These are contractor invoice rates; actual observer take-home pay is lower after the contractor accounts for insurance, communications, equipment, management, and logistical support costs.
ICCAT	Not specified.	MRAG (ROP observers): approximately USD 283/day at sea. MRAG is paid approximately USD 400/day for observer travel, plus lodging.
CCSBT	Not known to the CCSBT Secretariat.	Not directly applicable; transshipment observers are provided through IOTC and ICCAT under MOU. CCSBT does not have information on the rates paid to those observers.

Meaningful comparison of observer remuneration across organizations is limited by the availability of information, particularly for national programs. Most secretariats do not have visibility into what individual flag states pay their national observers. Where third-party contractors are used, the rates reflect what the commission or fleet pays to the contractor rather than the observer’s salary.

IATTC purse-seine observers, paid directly by the IATTC Secretariat at USD 58–65 per sea day, receive rates at the lower end of the range compared to the contracted rates seen in IOTC and ICCAT transshipment programs. This difference reflects the distinct nature of the programs: IATTC purse-seine observers are employed directly as part of a commission-run program, whereas contracted transshipment observer rates through MRAG incorporate a range of overhead costs beyond the observer’s compensation. The MRAG rates applicable to IATTC’s transshipment program are consistent with those reported by IOTC and ICCAT for similar contracted arrangements.

4. Program Structure and Secretariat Roles

The five organizations employ a range of approaches to achieve their required observer coverage levels, and the role of each Secretariat varies accordingly.

IATTC operates the most centralized observer arrangement among the five organizations. The IATTC Secretariat directly runs the purse-seine observer program, employing staff who train and deploy observers and conduct end-of-trip debriefings and data entry. Individual flag states may operate national programs for up to 50% of their trips; the IATTC program fills the remainder. Transshipment observers are deployed through a contract with MRAG. Longline observer programs are operated exclusively at the national level, with no IATTC Secretariat involvement.

WCPFC operates at the opposite end of the spectrum: it maintains a Regional Observer Programme (ROP) framework—including standards, data requirements, and an authorization and audit function—but does not directly deploy observers. Coverage is achieved through a network of 23 authorized observer providers, most of which are national programs, supplemented by sub-regional programs and one private authorized provider. The Secretariat conducts audits of observer providers every five years and works with the Pacific Community (SPC) on data management.

IOTC maintains two separate programs. The scientific Regional Observer Scheme (ROS) is implemented by member states, which deploy their own national observers. The at-sea transshipment monitoring program is outsourced to a MRAG/CapFish consortium; the Secretariat approves training curricula and observer candidates and reviews deployment reports. The IOTC Secretariat played a more limited role in training for the ROS in recent years, though this was not characterized as an ongoing program.

ICCAT operates national programs for general observer coverage and two Regional Observer Programmes (ROPs) managed by contracted consortiums: ROP-BFT (since 2010), covering bluefin tuna activities in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, and ROP-Transshipment (since 2007), covering at-sea transshipment. The Secretariat retains final approval over observer recruitment for the ROPs and prepares reporting for subsidiary bodies. National programs are self-managed by CPCs.

CCSBT relies entirely on national observer programs for scientific monitoring, with each Member operating its own program in conformity with the CCSBT Scientific Observer Program Standards (SOPS). For transshipment monitoring, CCSBT leverages the ROP infrastructure of IOTC and ICCAT under bilateral MOUs, whereby observers from those programs are authorized as CCSBT observers for SBT transshipments. The CCSBT Secretariat manages the data exchange program, maintains its electronic data system (eSBT), and cross-checks transshipment data against Catch Documentation Scheme records.

5. Cost-Sharing and Cost Recovery Mechanisms

The question of how observer costs are shared or recovered at the commission level was the primary subject of this inquiry. The analysis reveals meaningful variation among the five organizations, and IATTC’s arrangements are notable for their relatively high degree of commission-level cost sharing.

RFMO	Scientific Observer Cost-Sharing	Transshipment Observer Cost-Sharing
IATTC	Commission-level cost sharing for Class 6 purse-seine observer coverage: 70% funded by AIDCP (La Jolla Agreement parties); 30% funded through IATTC	Fleet-based cost recovery: costs paid collectively by IATTC Members (6 participants) with LL vessels transshipping at sea, allocated by number of

RFMO	Scientific Observer Cost-Sharing	Transshipment Observer Cost-Sharing
	annual budget assessed to all Members. No commission-level cost sharing for longline observers.	transshipments and weight of fish transshipped by each flag.
WCPFC	No RFMO-wide pooled cost sharing. Observer deployment costs borne by Members and/or vessel operators through arrangements with their observer provider. Two sub-regional frameworks (U.S. Treaty, FSM Arrangement) pool and recover costs within those structures.	Same framework applies: costs borne by Members/operators. No commission-level cost recovery mechanism for transshipment observers.
IOTC	No commission-level cost sharing for the scientific Regional Observer Scheme (ROS). Costs are covered entirely by member states or their vessels.	Fleet-based cost recovery: costs borne by fleets participating in the at-sea transshipment monitoring program (operated by the MRAG/CapFish consortium), apportioned by the quantity transshipped by each fleet.
ICCAT	National programs: fully funded by each CPC. ROP-BFT: each CPC pays the costs of observer coverage for its own BFT-E activities (purse seine, cage transfers, farm harvesting, etc.).	CPC-based cost recovery via ROP-Transshipment: CPCs pay based on total weight transshipped of all major ICCAT species in the previous year. IOTC and CCSBT also participate under MOU and pay proportionally for transshipments in their respective Convention areas.
CCSBT	No commission-level cost sharing for scientific observers. Each Member funds its own national observer program.	Commission-fronted cost recovery: CCSBT funds transshipment observer costs upfront (invoiced by IOTC or ICCAT under MOU), then recovers those costs from the relevant Member whose vessels participated in the transshipment.

5.1 IATTC

IATTC has the most active commission-level cost-sharing arrangement for scientific observer coverage among the five organizations. For Class 6 purse-seine vessels, observer costs are shared between the Parties to the Agreement on the International Dolphin Conservation Program (AIDCP), which covers 70% of direct observer costs, and the full IATTC membership, which funds the remaining 30% through the annual IATTC budget. This arrangement reflects the dual mandate of the IATTC purse-seine observer program, which collects both scientific and AIDCP compliance data.

For at-sea transshipment observers (provided through MRAG under contract), costs are allocated collectively to those IATTC Members (6 participants) whose longline vessels conduct transshipments, with each flag state’s share determined by the number of transshipments and the weight of fish transshipped. This is a form of fleet-based cost recovery that is proportional to use.

There is no commission-level cost sharing for longline observers, which are deployed and funded entirely at the national level.

5.2 WCPFC

WCPFC has no RFMO-wide pooled cost-sharing mechanism for observer deployment. Deployment costs are borne by Members and/or vessel operators, typically through bilateral arrangements between the observer provider (usually a national program) and the flag state or vessel operator. The Commission’s financial contribution is limited to the administrative functions of the ROP—authorization, auditing, and data standards—funded through the general WCPFC budget.

An exception exists for two sub-regional frameworks: the U.S. Treaty and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Arrangement, which operate through private service providers. Under these frameworks, observer costs are pooled and recovered among participating parties, though this is a sub-regional rather than commission-level arrangement.

5.3 IOTC

IOTC maintains a clear distinction between its two observer programs with respect to cost. For the scientific ROS, there is no commission-level cost sharing; all costs are borne by member states individually. For the transshipment monitoring program operated by the MRAG/CapFish consortium, costs are borne by the participating fleets and apportioned in proportion to the quantities transhipped by each fleet. This is functionally analogous to the IATTC transshipment cost-recovery model.

5.4 ICCAT

ICCAT's cost arrangements vary by program type. National observer programs are fully funded by each CPC. For ROP-BFT, each CPC directly pays the costs of observer coverage associated with its own bluefin tuna activities. For ROP-Transshipment, costs are recovered from CPCs based on total weight of major ICCAT species transhipped in the prior year.

ICCAT has also formalized cross-RFMO cost-sharing arrangements. Under MOUs with IOTC and CCSBT, observers from the ICCAT ROP-Transshipment may monitor transshipments of species regulated by those organizations when carrier vessels operate across convention areas during a single voyage. IOTC and CCSBT pay proportional shares of the associated costs. This cooperative arrangement is the most developed inter-RFMO cost-sharing mechanism among the five organizations reviewed.

5.5 CCSBT

CCSBT bears no direct cost for scientific observers; each Member funds its own national program. For transshipment monitoring, CCSBT is invoiced by IOTC or ICCAT for observer deployment and training costs associated with SBT transshipments under the applicable MOU. The CCSBT Secretariat initially funds these costs and then recovers them from the relevant Member whose vessels participated in each transshipment. This creates a mechanism in which the Commission acts as an intermediary—providing collective financing and then pursuing cost recovery from individual Members—similar in principle to the IATTC transshipment cost-recovery model.

6. Comparative Analysis

The responses from the four organizations reveal a general pattern across tuna RFMOs: commission-level cost sharing for scientific observer programs is uncommon, while transshipment observer programs more frequently incorporate cost-recovery mechanisms that allocate costs to flag states in proportion to their participation.

IATTC stands out as the only organization with direct commission-level financial contributions to a scientific observer program—the purse-seine program jointly funded by the AIDCP and the IATTC budget. This arrangement is unique in that it reflects both the commission's operational role as observer deployer and the specific structure of the AIDCP. No other RFMO reviewed operates a comparable arrangement, though ICCAT's ROP-BFT involves direct CPC payments to a commission-managed program.

For transshipment observers, three of the five organizations—IATTC, IOTC, and CCSBT—allocate costs to flag states based on their vessels' level of transshipment activity. ICCAT similarly recovers costs from CPCs based on weight transhipped. WCPFC alone has no transshipment cost-recovery mechanism at the commission level, though coverage requirements exist.

The cross-RFMO cost-sharing arrangement between ICCAT, IOTC, and CCSBT for transshipment observer coverage is noteworthy. By pooling observer resources across convention areas on shared carrier voyages, these organizations reduce duplication and allocate costs more efficiently. CCSBT's transshipment monitoring relies entirely on this model, making it dependent on the infrastructure of the other two organizations.

For longline observers, no organization—including IATTC—operates a commission-level cost-sharing program. All five organizations rely on flag state programs for longline observer coverage, and costs are born entirely at the national level. This reflects both the operational complexity of monitoring a diffuse, multi-flag longline fleet and the political sensitivities associated with observer costs for this sector.

Note: The information presented in this paper is based on responses received from the Secretariats of WCPFC, IOTC, CCSBT, and ICCAT to a standardized questionnaire issued by the IATTC Secretariat in February–March 2026. Responses represent the understanding of the responding Secretariat staff and may not capture all nuances of each organization's applicable measures. Information on IATTC arrangements is drawn from Secretariat records.