

**Report of the Second Meeting of the Virtual Working Group on a
Sustainable Financial Position for ICCAT (VWG-SF)**
(online, 15 June 2026)

1. Opening of the meeting

The Chair of the Standing Committee on Finance and Administration (STACFAD), Ms Laura Marot, welcomed the participants and opened the Second Meeting of the Virtual Working Group on a Sustainable Financial Position (VWG-SF) (the “VWG-SF”), which was held online on 15 June 2026.

The Chair presented the agenda, which was adopted without changes and is attached as **Appendix 1**.

2. Introduction of participants

The Executive Secretary welcomed the participants and listed the countries present at the meeting, which was attended by 18 Contracting Parties (CPs) (**Appendix 2**).

3. Special Meeting Participation Fund (MPF)

The Chair indicated that there was a meeting document specifically addressing the recent use of the MPF and the estimated funding needs for 2027, and invited the Secretariat to present the background, scope and operation of the fund. The Secretariat presented the document “Special Meeting Participation Fund (MPF)”.

3.1 Current level and use of the MPF

This agenda item was considered together with the following item.

3.2 Division of funds during the year and between SCRS and COM meetings

The Secretariat presented the current level and use of the MPF, explaining that the objective was to provide an overview of the fund’s development, its planning and the projected needs for the second semester of 2026, also explaining the current filtering system and distribution of the MPF by semesters, and within each semester, how the funds are distributed between SCRS and Commission meetings.

Following the presentation, the Chair opened the discussions on two questions. First on the sources of the funding and second on the meetings to be funded and in particular on the allocation of funds between COM and SCRS meetings.

On the source of the funding, the Chair emphasized that the funds available had been unstable and that part of the accumulated balance still originated from the COVID period. Consequently, it should not be assumed that this level of funding would remain available in 2027. The Chair also noted that expenditure under the MPF had increased, and that any decision to increase the number of funded participants would need to be supported by additional funding or a reallocation of resources.

The Chair further emphasized that funding the MPF through the ICCAT regular budget would provide greater financial stability than relying on voluntary contributions as they depend on the willingness of the Contracting Parties. Since 2021, only one Contracting Party has made voluntary contributions, and not on an annual basis. It was therefore suggested for greater financial stability that the MPF would rely more on a stable source of funding, such as the regular budget.

Several members of the VWG-SF agreed that the MPF should be based on stable and predictable funding sources, with voluntary contributions serving as a complement.

On the meetings to be funded and in particular on the allocation of funds between COM and SCRS meetings, several members of the VWG-SF agreed that support for science should not be viewed merely as an expense, but as an investment in the functioning of ICCAT. One Contracting Party recalled that, unlike other RFMOs, much of ICCAT's scientific work depends on the participation of its Contracting Parties, and that, consequently, funding scientists has strategic value for the Commission.

Another member of the VWG-SF considered both the SCRS and Commission meetings essential and supported maintaining the current balance, unless there were indications that the system was preventing priority needs from being addressed.

A member of the VWG-SF opposed setting fixed percentages between scientific and Commission meetings, as participation needs vary from year to year.

A member of the VWG-SF supported a more structural funding approach through ICCAT's regular budget, while cautioning that the overall budget should not be increased without seeking savings in other budget items. The possibility of holding some scientific meetings - especially data preparatory or stock assessment meetings - online was proposed, in order to free up resources that could be allocated to strengthen participation in the Commission's annual meeting.

Another member of the VWG-SF expressed caution regarding a significant increase in the MPF budget and requested that the balance with other ICCAT expenditures be taken into consideration. Another member of the VWG-SF proposed assessing prioritisation criteria, such as giving preference to Contracting Parties that had not received support in the first half of the year when they requested funding in the second semester.

The SCRS Chair stated that some requests had been rejected due to the strict application of the rules. He also explained that many in-person or hybrid scientific meetings are necessary, as they allow for more efficient progress, particularly in complex stock assessment processes. He noted that many informal online meetings already take place, but that fully replacing key meetings could reduce the quality and efficiency of the SCRS's scientific work.

In conclusion, the Chair identified a general consensus, noting that both science and participation in the Commission are priorities, and that there appears no need to set rigid percentages between the SCRS and the Commission. The current practice of dividing the fund by semester is functioning well. However, it is clear that it is not possible to maintain the same level of funding, increase the number of participants and leave the budget unchanged simultaneously. The Chair presented several options: to significantly increase the MPF; the release of funds from other ICCAT budget items; or shifting priorities within the MPF itself. However, the Chair indicated as a medium-term orientation a move towards more stable funding, mainly through the regular budget, potentially in a gradual manner.

3.2.1 Practices in other RFMOs

The Chair presented the document "Management of the Meeting Participation Fund (MPF) – Practices of other Tuna RFMOs", summarising the management of the MPF and the practices used in other tuna RFMOs.

3.2.2 Potential changes in the practice

Following the comparison of MPF management, no practical changes were identified.

3.3 Participation filtering procedures

3.3.1 Practices in other RFMOs

The Chair reviewed the practices of other tuna RFMOs on how they were dealing with the requests for support. In the IOTC, a filtering mechanism is applied based on criteria such as compliance with deadlines, submission of scientific documents, or the performance of chairing functions. Contrary to ICCAT, the selection is carried out by a small panel including the Secretariat and the relevant Chair.

In the WCPFC, the Fund is operated by financing applications in the order they are received until the available resources are exhausted. However, the Chair cautioned that this model could present challenges if a significant proportion of the funds were allocated to a single meeting, thereby compromising the availability of funding for subsequent meetings.

With regard to the IATTC, the practice appeared to be different, as an annual strategic investment plan was used to guide priorities and the use of the fund.

The Chair raised the question of whether the filtering procedure should be maintained or replaced by a more automatic system, such as one based on the order in which applications are received. She noted, however, that if applications exceeded the available funds, there would still need to be an objective mechanism for determining which applications should be funded.

A member of the VWG-SF supported an objective pre-qualification process based on criteria such as scientific profile or relevant experience but rejected any subjective assessment of the adequacy or relevance of the scientific contribution, considering it potentially discriminatory. The member of the VWG-SF therefore proposed applying a “first come, first served” approach once the basic eligibility requirements had been satisfied.

Another member of VWG-SF considered that the current system does not present any major problems, provided that it ensures that for science meetings, funded participants are scientists and are able to contribute to the meetings.

Several members of the VWG-SF considered that the submission of a scientific paper should not be a mandatory requirement or the main criterion for access to the fund, but that a more flexible criterion should be adopted (e.g. a letter or statement of motivation).

Support was also expressed for more transparent selection procedures. Some members of VWG-SF considered that some form of prioritization should be retained when applications exceed the available resources.

3.3.2 Potential amendments to the Rules of Procedures

The Chair concluded that the current system should be partially modified. She indicated that a possible solution would be to replace the concept of “filtering” with a combination of objective pre-requisites and, where necessary, transparent prioritisation.

The pre-requisites would include that the Contracting Party is eligible, that the individual has a scientific background or profile, and that their current role within the delegation is linked to scientific work. If applications subsequently exceed the available funds, prioritisation would be applied on the basis of clear, pre-established criteria.

The following possible criteria were identified: the relevance of previous publications; the applicant’s field of specialisation; the submission of a scientific paper/presentation; the submission of a letter of motivation; previous participation (or lack thereof) in funded meetings during the year; the potential future contribution to ICCAT work; and participation in working groups.

The Chair also proposed that, where prioritisation is necessary, it should not be the sole responsibility of the SCRS Chair or a rapporteur but should instead be undertaken by a small panel.

The SCRS Chair considered the proposal promising, particularly if it allows for the inclusion of new scientists who have not yet participated extensively in ICCAT, but who have a scientific profile and hold relevant functions.

In conclusion, the Chair indicated that it appears possible to reach a solution before the Annual meeting in November, through an amendment to the MPF Rules of Procedure aimed at making the process more transparent and clearer. She also noted that a Contracting Party could submit a formal proposal for amendment and invited the Contracting Party to announce their intention to do so, otherwise the STACFAD Chair herself could prepare a proposal.

3.4 Number of delegates funded by the MPF

3.4.1 Projections of associated costs

The Secretariat presented the document “Summary of the use of the Meeting Participation Fund (MPF) in recent years and estimates of requirements for 2027”. The objective was to analyse funded participation in recent years, both at SCRS and Commission meetings, and to estimate the future financial requirements of the fund, based on four different scenarios.

The Chair summarised the scenarios, explaining what each would entail: Scenario 1 would represent the *status quo*; Scenario 2 would prioritise the funding of a second delegate at the Annual Meeting of the Commission; Scenario 3 also includes the SCRS plenary; and Scenario 4 would extend the funding to all meetings. She also emphasized that any increase in the number of participants will have a budgetary impact and will require a decision on whether to increase the ICCAT budget or reallocate funds from other items.

The Chair noted that Scenario 4 seemed unrealistic, as it amounts to nearly one million euros out of a total ICCAT budget of around six million. She also indicated that Scenario 3 represented a considerable increase and that even Scenario 2, although more moderate, entails an additional cost of almost €100,000 compared with Scenario 1.

One member of the VWG-SF supported Scenario 2, considering it a balanced solution to the growing complexity of the Annual Meeting of the Commission. It noted that funding a second delegate at that meeting would improve participation, without extending support to all meetings or compromising the sustainability of the MPF.

Most members of the VWG-SF expressed their support for Scenario 2 as the most realistic and balanced option, as it would allow for the funding of a second participant at the Annual Meeting of the Commission with a more manageable budgetary impact.

Some members of the VWG-SF remained keen to move towards Scenario 3 in the medium term to strengthen participation in key scientific meetings, whilst acknowledging the current budgetary constraints.

Several members of the VWG-SF also expressed concern about the budgetary impact of the more ambitious scenarios and considered it necessary to explore reallocations, cuts in other items or additional sources of funding.

The Chair concluded that whilst there was no clear consensus, there is a general consensus that Scenario 2 appears to be the most feasible in the short term, while Scenario 3 remains a possible medium-term objective for some members of the VWG-SF. She emphasized that it is not possible to increase the number of participants at all meetings while maintaining the same budget without making cuts under another budget heading.

3.5 Way forward to the Annual Meeting

Ahead of the Annual Meeting in November 2026, the Chair proposed that a number of budgetary options be prepared so that the Contracting Parties could decide. The options mentioned include: maintaining the *status quo*; increasing the MPF and accepting an increase in the overall budget; increasing the MPF, but cutting other items in the ICCAT budget; or allowing two participants at the Annual Meeting of the Commission through an internal reallocation of the MPF, for example, by moving some meetings online.

Any proposal to increase the MPF would be accompanied by explicit proposals regarding the necessary cuts in other items, so that CPs would not have to improvise such cuts during the meeting and supported by the possibility of a gradual increase in the regular budget for the MPF.

As regards possible amendments to the Rules of Procedure, the Chair identified two main changes: one relating to the criteria for selecting or prioritising SCRS participants – moving away from the term “filtering” – and another relating to the number of participants eligible for funding.

The Chair noted that, if no CP submitted a proposal on the procedures for selecting SCRS participants, she herself, together with the STACFAD Vice Chair, could prepare a proposal. However, as regards the number of funded delegates, she acknowledged that it would be more difficult to draw up a proposal and therefore encouraged delegations that had already submitted proposals the previous year, particularly Tunisia and Egypt, to coordinate their efforts to submit a joint proposal by November 2026.

The Chair closed the discussion on the MPF by making it clear that two possible ways of containing the budgetary impact of the MPF would be to change the format of some meetings – including the possibility of holding certain meetings online – or to reallocate resources within the budget, by the possibility of a gradual increase in the regular budget for the MPF.

4. Discussion of options to decrease cost of meeting organization

4.1 Room layout for the Annual Meeting

The Chair returned to the pending issue of room layout for the Annual Meeting, recalling that at the previous meeting there had been general support for moving away from the current system, although one member of the Group had expressly called for the *status quo* to be maintained.

The Chair explained that several alternatives had been considered: retaining the U-shaped layout; modifying it by reducing the number of people at the main table or adding a second room; or abandoning the U-shape in favour of a United Nations-style configuration. The Secretariat presented the document “Analysis of room layout scenarios” with a supporting PowerPoint presentation, highlighting the technical characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of each layout. With the objective of identifying more efficient alternatives, whilst ensuring the safety and comfort of participants and taking into account the limitations of each venue, the Secretariat also presented the analysis, noting that the document compares different room layouts for ICCAT meetings, assessing their operational, spatial, technical, audiovisual and budgetary implications.

The Chair welcomed the document and pointed out that there is no perfect layout that minimises space, maximises interaction and improves comfort whilst at the same time reducing technical requirements. She therefore expressed preference with the idea put forward by several delegations, to offer a range of options to host countries, rather than imposing a single layout.

The Chair then asked whether delegations would accept the option of abandoning the mandatory U-shape layout and allowing the host country to choose from several configurations, whilst always adhering to minimum criteria that ensure the Commission can work and take decisions efficiently.

One member of the VWG-SF expressed support for single-room configurations, as they better preserve integration among delegations and avoid some of the technical and operational complexity associated with annexed rooms.

Another member of the VWG-SF clearly supported moving away from the *status quo* as the sole option, noting that the current model makes it difficult for some developing Contracting Parties to host the Annual Meeting. It also emphasized that it would be problematic to have only one person per delegation in the U.

Another member of the VWG-SF agreed that it would be preferable to allow more than two people per delegation in the room, although it acknowledged the need for greater flexibility. It also requested that delegations be informed sufficiently in advance of the seating arrangement to be used, so that internal logistics can be organized adequately.

In conclusion, the Chair identified a general consensus in favour of increasing the number of Contracting Parties capable of hosting meetings and introducing flexibility as regards the layout of the meeting room.

The Chair added that the range of options should include a list of preferences: the U-shape could remain the preferred option where feasible, but if the host country did not have a suitable room, other layouts could be used. She also noted that delegations should be informed of the intended room layout sufficiently in advance.

She noted that the U-shape is likely still the best layout for interaction, but that other options may improve comfort and safety or facilitate the availability of venues. Accordingly, a document would be prepared by November 2026 proposing that the Commission move away from the *status quo* as the sole option and offer host countries a range of layout options, with clear technical requirements and prior validation by the Secretariat.

4.2 Fees for accredited Observers

The Chair introduced the item by noting that the fees currently paid by accredited observers to attend ICCAT meetings were set in 2005. The original objective of these fees was to apply a principle of partial cost recovery, that is, for observers to contribute towards a portion of the cost incurred by the Commission in facilitating their participation.

The Chair noted that, since then, the meetings have grown in size and complexity, and there has also been inflation. It is therefore considered necessary to update the fees. She also indicated that, at present, an observer organisation pays the same fee regardless of the type or length of meeting.

The Secretariat presented the document “Proposal to update the observer fee for ICCAT meetings”, concerning the proposal to update observer fees. It explained that, at the previous meeting of the VWG-SF, the need to revise these fees had already been discussed, taking into account inflation and the type of meeting, and it was indicated that the new analysis distinguishes between different types of meetings, including only those with interpretation, to better reflect their specific characteristics and requirements.

Several members of the VWG-SF supported the idea of differentiating fees according to the type of meeting, based on the varying costs associated with in-person, intersessional and virtual meetings. Some members also supported the approach in the proposal tabled that no or a lower fee could be applied to virtual meetings, given their lower cost and the desirability of maintaining the inclusivity and transparency of online participation.

Some members of the VWG-SF indicated that not all observer organisations have the same financial capacity, so a high fee may be of little consequence to some, but significant for smaller organisations.

Another member of the VWG-SF intervened to clarify that, in its view, intergovernmental organizations should not be required to pay fees to participate as observers in another intergovernmental organization such as ICCAT. The Executive Secretary clarified that these bodies do not pay such fees.

The Chair concluded that there was general agreement on the differentiated structure by type of meeting and on maintaining a philosophy of cost recovery rather than revenue generation. She also noted a position shared by several delegations in favour of revising or eliminating fees for online meetings, a matter to be decided in November 2026.

It was indicated that, ahead of the Annual Meeting, a new document will be prepared containing more information than the document presented, including a more detailed breakdown by type of meeting. It will also be reviewed whether it is appropriate for an organization to pay the same fee whether one person attends or two, as the Chair acknowledged that this may not be entirely equitable.

The Chair also confirmed that the document must make it clear that intergovernmental organizations are exempt from paying fees.

Finally, she indicated that the VWG-SF is a virtual working group that is not open to observers, so the discussion took place without them; in November 2026, however, observers may be present in the room when the discussion is resumed.

5. Other matters

Three informative points were presented.

5.1 Scope and functioning of the VWG-SF

Firstly, the Chair indicated that the VWG-SF currently has too narrow a scope, as in theory it can only address financial matters. However, STACFAD is not solely a financial body, but also an administrative one. She therefore suggested that the VWG-SF could be restructured to function more like an intersessional STACFAD or “mini-STACFAD”, which would allow it to address administrative matters as well and, if necessary, recommendations arising from the performance review. She also commented that the current functioning of the VWG-SF was not sufficiently transparent. She therefore announced that she would propose rules of procedure or terms of reference for the VWG-SF in November 2026, with the aim of broadening its scope to include administrative matters and making it more inclusive.

5.2 ICCAT performance review

The Chair recalled that a draft set of terms of reference for this review had been examined in March 2026 and subsequently circulated to all Contracting Parties. She highlighted that comments had been received from some five Contracting Parties and that the intention was to consolidate these and prepare a revised version. A new round of comments would then be opened and, once these had been incorporated, a final version of the draft would be published as a document for the STACFAD meeting in November 2026.

5.3 Draft budget

The Chair recalled that a preliminary version of the budget is normally circulated to all Contracting Parties in September for comments. This procedure would be maintained this year, but an improvement would be sought: if the comments received are sufficiently specific, efforts will be made to prepare a revised version of the budget incorporating those observations before November 2026.

The Chair emphasized that the Contracting Parties should not wait until November to raise significant issues regarding the budget. The aim would be to make use of October to incorporate comments and save time during the STACFAD meeting, which has a very busy agenda every year and which, furthermore, in 2026 would also include the terms of reference for the performance review.

The Chair concluded that, by November, meeting documents will be prepared with the preliminary agreements or possible decisions discussed by the VWG-SF. Among the issues to be decided in November 2026, she mentioned: the new rules of procedure for the MPF; the venue arrangements for the Annual Meeting; fees for accredited observers; and the ICCAT performance review.

Before closing the meeting, a member of the VWG-SF enquired about the status of the proposal concerning the Secretariat pension system, noting that resolving this issue at the Annual Meeting was a priority. The Chair replied that the STACFAD Vice Chair was working intensively in consultation with the Secretariat and that, although the matter had not been discussed within the VWG-SF, progress had indeed been made. She indicated that a proposal to address this issue was expected by November 2026.

6. Conclusions and closure

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their participation, emphasizing that it had helped to clarify the general direction of the work for November 2026. She also thanked the Interpreters and the Secretariat.

It was agreed that the meeting report would be adopted by correspondence.

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