

April 2018—AQUACULTURE PERSPECTIVES

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Can Our Data Be Trusted? Maybe Not!

by Bill Mancini

As Apollo 13 astronaut Jim Lovell famously said on the way to the moon in 1970, “Houston, we have a problem.” Boy, did they!

The problem we have resembles his in no way, shape, or form. But is no less significant (i.e., lives are at stake) to our mission in aquaculture of feeding a hungry world.

I read recently with amazement an account by Michael New in *World Aquaculture* magazine [2017, 48(4):12] about the status of aquaculture data collection and data quality at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

While inaccuracies in data are to be expected (no system is perfect), the magnitude of these inaccuracies is quite shocking.

I will add here, as Michael New did in his article, FAO is not at fault here—it’s not their fault! Let’s be clear about that. FAO does the best they can to literally put a jigsaw puzzle of data together into as coherent and complete a document as possible. It’s a daunting task, and here’s why.

FAO relies on reporting from each producer nation. If the data they receive are inaccurate, or they receive no data at all, that immediately puts the entire process in jeopardy when you add those inaccuracies to errors and omissions from 200 other nations.

For example in 2015, FAO received production reports from only 58 percent of aquaculture-producing countries, and New pointed out “non-reporting countries include a considerable number of global and regional major aquaculture producer countries.” New also reported, “Among the received data reports, the majority of them have substandard reporting quality in terms of completeness, timeliness, consistency and accuracy, etc.”

He went on to say, “It is therefore clear that 83 of the 201 countries currently with aquaculture production are not reporting data to FAO at all, requiring information to be prised out of other national sources or estimated by FAO staff.”

That is truly shocking and amazing! I, for one, had no idea.

This is a very unsettling development. Without data that at least resemble reality, we might as well create policy and make strategic decisions with a blindfold on, or use a Ouija board.

If we had other data upon which we could rely, this would be a less severe problem. Unfortunately, alternatives do not exist. I, for example, rest my global production data reporting to my clients squarely on the back of FAO, as do many other groups and individuals in all kinds of professional circles.

Where are we to go? What are we to do?

The answer must come from within and from the grass roots. Aquaculturists across the globe, and in particular the companies that supply and support them (they probably have the most clout), must rise up and insist on more and a better performance from their government agencies. This is too important to ignore.

Aquaculturists are no longer second-class citizens as compared to cattle producers or poultry producers or swine producers or any other producer of agricultural livestock and commodities. We deserve the same level of attention and support.

That, of course, takes funding (or more funding)—easier said than done, I know, especially in this day and age of austere budgets around the world. But we must display a collective will to get this done.

I hope my column will spur people to action. Agricultural statistics reporting agencies all over the world must hear the word that the reporting of aquaculture data must be as complete and as accurate as possible. Make it a priority.

The alternative is not acceptable.

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