

Cluster farming helps improve tilapia production in Fiji

By SeafoodSource staff

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After seeing success in Africa and Asia, tilapia producers in Fiji have been experimenting with aquaculture cluster groups.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) in Fiji has been working with the European Union and the Fiji Ministry of Fisheries and Forests (MFF) in assisting smallholder tilapia farmers to improve production by working together in cluster groups.

More than a dozen farmers are part of two cluster groups that have been formed in the Western and Central divisions of Fiji through the efforts of SPC's Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) division and the European Union-funded Increasing Agricultural Commodity Trade (IACT) project, in consultation with relevant government departments and farmers.

The farmers were assisted through technical assessment of their farming methods and production output. Teams from SPC and MFF's Farm Development Unit made recommendations to farmers about a range of improvements in their operations and equipment, covering aspects such as pond design, farm management practices, post-harvest handling of fish and proper record keeping. By attending regular cluster meetings, farmers who previously did not know each other have shared knowledge, equipment and have coordinated to regularly supply fish to markets.

Since the formation of the clusters in 2013, SPC and MFF have been closely monitoring the production performance of the farmers involved, and so far the results have been positive.

"The production of tilapia by the participating farmers in the Central Division cluster in the 2013–2014 period has doubled, in comparison with the 2011–2012 period prior to the IACT project intervention. Production for the Western Division cluster is also expected to increase significantly," said Jone Varawa, a member of the SPC aquaculture team working with the clusters and the aquaculture production technician for the IACT project.

Varawa said that in a cluster model some farmers might ultimately choose to specialize in one aspect of the fish custody chain, such as in hatchery production, fingerling nursery or feed manufacture. Other farmers then “cluster” around these nodes of aquaculture services and are able to concentrate their own efforts purely on fish grow-out.

“The farm cluster strategy helps commercial tilapia farmers in Fiji to take responsibility for their own aquaculture services and farm inputs, rather than relying heavily on government support which is better directed toward small-scale farms growing fish for food security. This is a welcome development for farmers who will be able to better respond to the market demand for fish and contribute towards improving food security in the country,” he said.

According to Varawa commercially-minded farmers can adopt the farm cluster strategy to build the industry to another level beyond what is possible through government support alone. [ICTI]
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The IACT project is also assisting clusters of aquaculture producers in other Pacific countries, such as the cage culture tilapia farmers in Lake Sirinumu in Papua New Guinea, and the marine ornamental giant clam farmers in Palau. There are also plans to introduce this cluster strategy to seaweed farmers in Papua New Guinea, and to tilapia and prawn farmers in Vanuatu.