



INFOFISH Information System

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

INFOFISH is unique in a sense that

- (i) as the name shows, it deals with only information on fish and fishery products
- (ii) all compiled fishery information, e.g. import/export prices of fishery products, quantities and values of imports/exports, cold storage holdings and production are directly channelled to the fishery industry, i.e. importers, exporters, processors, etc
- (iii) selling information to the industry is the major source of revenue for the organization and will become dominant in a few years
- (iv) the terms of reference of the organisation is very specific to promote fishery exports from developing countries to developed countries within the region through information dissemination.

II. WHAT INFOFISH IS ALL ABOUT

INFOFISH, an intergovernmental organisation specialising in marketing information and advisory services for fish products in the Asia/Pacific region, has been in operation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia since July 1981. It was established to promote trade in fish and fishery products from and within this region.

INFOFISH collaborates closely with the network of similar services established by FAO throughout the world - in Latin America (INFOPECSA), Africa (INFOPECHE) and the Arab World (INFOSAMAK). It also has direct access to GLOBEFISH, the computerised system of fish marketing information maintained by FAO at its headquarters in Rome.

INFOFISH provides several services, namely:

- (i) **The Trade Promotion Service** assists the day-to-day fish trade by identifying new marketing opportunities and new sources of supplies for companies in the Asia-Pacific region.

The INFOFISH Trade News (published fortnightly) which contains current information on prices and market trends.

- (ii) **The Technical Advisory Service** provides technical information on all post-harvest aspects of fisheries plus basics on fish farming. It covers fish handling and processing, quality control, packaging plant organisation and hygiene, fish inspection and training.

- ° The Fish Inspector (published quarterly) aimed at promoting international cooperation among fish inspection services and providing general information.
- (iii) The Marketing Information Service provides regular information on world and regional fish markets through.
 - ° The INFOFISH International (published six times a year) focusing on market trends, new products, processing equipment and other post-harvest aspects of fisheries as well as harvesting features.
 - ° Special studies on products and markets
 - ° Fish Exporters and Importers Directory.

III. INFORMATION SYSTEM AND RESOURCES OF INFOFISH

INFOFISH collects information regularly from the following sources:

- (i) Market News Correspondents (40)
- (ii) National Liaison Offices (10)
- (iii) Non-member governments (10)
- (iv) Other FAO fishery marketing projects (3)
- (v) FAO Headquarters
- (vi) Periodicals (140) and books

Besides, regular visitors and correspondences provide us with additional and latest information. The information is compiled and analysed by three divisions before being disseminated mainly via three periodicals to the following:

- (i) Fishery Product Traders (500)
- (ii) National Liaison Offices (10)
- (iii) Other Governmental/International Agencies (10)
- (iv) Companies related to the fishery industry (7,000)
- (v) FAO Headquarters.

The following information resources are maintained and updated at INFOFISH:

- (i) Importers, Exporters Register in and outside the region (2,000)
- (ii) ITN subscribers list (770)
- (iii) II subscribers list (7,500)
- (iv) Consultant register (600)
- (v) Equipment register (1,500)
- (vi) Fish Inspector subscribers list (600)
- (vii) Audio visual library (slides/videotapes)
- (viii) Fishery library (140 periodical plus books)
- (ix) 200 statistics tables (1983 to date) in the INFOFISH computer.

IV. GLOBEFISH COMPUTERISED DATA BASE

INFOFISH offers access to the resources of this computerised data bank of fisheries information, operated by FAO headquarters in Rome. GLOBEFISH presents detailed information for medium to long term analysis, on the market situation of commercial species, and publishes the quarterly "GLOBEFISH Highlights" on the basis of this information.

GLOBEFISH is a computerised data base which can be easily accessed by users through a data terminal equipment.

The data base consists of several sections such as:

- ° Statistics
- ° Price information
- ° Factors influencing supply
- ° Factors influencing demand
- ° General fishery news
- ° Other trade related information

Total datalines are currently about 120 000.

INFOFISH and three other FAO regional projects, INFOPESCA, INFOPECHE and INFOSAMAK, are responsible for information collection in their respective areas. Information is obtained through their liaison offices, correspondents and governments and industry connections.

Once the information is stored in the data base, key words can be typed on a computer terminal to access specific information. And within seconds, all the required information will appear on a screen or be printed out.

It is intended that INFOFISH and other regional market information services will eventually make the system accessible to private companies and other institutions, probably for a fee to cover the costs of collecting and processing the information in the data base. Users who are unable to access GLOBEFISH directly, due to telecommunications or other reasons, may be able to obtain the information in printed form from INFOFISH or the other regional marketing services. However, due to the lack of availability of access services through personal computers in many countries, this service has not yet been realised.

From the past 5 years experience, the following problems are evident:

- (i) "Apple" as data terminal equipment was initially employed, but soon became obsolete. Presently, though data can be retrieved via an IBM-compatible.
- (ii) Complicated, easy-to-forget procedure to access the data base may be a deterrent to users.

- (iii) Trial and error time to retrieve the data you want, may prove costly.
- (iv) There were not many requests for this (one request per month).

FAO is currently planning the next stage i.e. replacing the host computer with IBM PC. In its proposal is stated the following:

Problems with the keyboarding which has to be done on an obsolete MDS computer have been experienced. Some already keyboarded data was lost, misplaced, etc. The BRS input format for tables is very cumbersome. The up-dating is done only once a month, whereas for the loading, a tape has to be prepared in FAO (a process which requires half a day of staff time), mailed by courier (coasting US\$87 and requiring 2-3 days in travel time), and the loading itself takes up to one week.

The access to BRS host computer has improved over the past 5 years; data lines are generally better now, and noise on lines has decreased substantially. In addition, BRS is now operational 24 hours a day - but not on Sundays. However, for the access process: dialing local PTT number, inputting PTT password plus BRS number, BRS passwords, etc. is still lengthy in most countries, as autodialing modems are not available on the market.

The lay-out of the out-put from the BRS databank is not very attractive, no paging is possible and it is quite difficult to see at one glance the important issues of the document. Headlines of the news items could not be searched and printed. Revision of search terms and inclusion of new search terms are quite lengthy and costly with the BRS host computer.

The use of the remote host for the databank creates some main problems in the final use of data. For the production of newsletters or periodical reports, the data have to be re-keyboarded. The cost for the storage of the databank has increased over the years, in addition user time costs - at present fully paid by GLOBEFISH - is running up to a substantial amount now that the number and the user-time of subscribers is increasing.

Most of the above disadvantages can be overcome by storing the GLOBEFISH databank on the IBM PC in Rome.

Keyboarding can be done directly on the computer (all information is searchable on the PC in Rome as it is inputted, thus no lapse of time between the keyboarding and the loading).

Users could receive up-to-date information twice a month instead of only once a month. Access is direct, therefore no lengthy dialing plus password inputting is necessary.

The lay-out can be made quite attractive by using Venture software for the design of the output. Paging is finally possible together with the printing of titles - to be used as an index to screen the information.

The final use of data is more efficient as the databank can be fed directly into programmes like Ventura, which produces graphs, newsletters, etc. Last but not least, the coast will be reduced as fees to the local PTT, leasing of modems, local telephone call, etc. have no longer to be paid by the subscribers. However, the monthly (fortnightly) courier service of the diskettes (streamers) to the different users (presently 8) will cost about US\$100/month.

Thus, GLOBEFISH is presently testing the storage of its databank on an IBM PC. If the system proves to be an alternative to the BRS host computer, speed-wise and quality-wise, the options for subscribers to the GLOBEFISH databank are:

- (i) Databank is loaded on subscriber's IBM PC (or compatible computer), thus facilitating production of news-letters, news-flashes, graphs, etc. Up-dates will come from Rome on diskettes, streamers, or other electronic means once or twice a month.
- (ii) The IBM PC in FAO, Rome, becomes a host computer and subscribers access it through a modem with almost the same procedure as for BRS.

V. EXPERIENCE FROM FISHLINE

FISHLINE, a telex service started by INFOFISH in 1984. The system involved sending out compiled information on fish prices and news not through mail but through telex to the industry, which would surely cut the mailing time. The service was open to ITN subscribers only:

Data is first sent by the data equipment terminal, i.e. office computer via the telephone line to the national packet service. Then, it is relayed and stored in the main frame computer, which is operated by the computer/telecommunication service company in, eg USA. The user in any one region can get access to the main frame in USA to retrieve the data he wants, via telex.

However, this service was soon terminated in the mid-stage (1984-85). The major reasons for the failure are:

- (i) The costs incurred both for the initial and operational stage were more than budgeted for. In particular, rental of the data storage space and data usage in the main frame computer had to be born by INFOFISH. This cost increased as users and usage time increased.
- (ii) Rearranging the data compiled to suit the format was time-consuming.
- (iii) The number of users did not increase as planned. Some of the traders simply did not have telex facilities.

As an alternative, the feasibility of setting up a service whereby users can request specific pages of the ITN via fax, is being explored.

VI. REMARKS

Based upon, the experience of the two computerised data base, namely GLOBEFISH and FISHLINE, the following remarks are noted:
For a non-commercially oriented institution,

- (i) It is difficult to operate the costly system within a sound financial background. It is rather likely to run at a loss.
- (ii) There is always a possibility that the information on the computer is not all that useful, perhaps rather secondary to the industry or policy makers.
- (iii) Cumbersome and time-consuming procedures to follow prove discouraging for users. Thus, the number of users are inevitably limited. It is difficult to modify the system into more user-friendly.

Thus, it is proposed that, if institutions like INFOFISH pursue such system as GLOBEFISH and FISHLINE further, division of labour is to be considered, i.e. a non-commercial organisation collects information while a profit-maximising private institution undertakes the operation of the computerised data base.

Note: the views on the computerised data base in this paper are solely my own, not any institution's.