

Conflict of Interest policy and ICES Code of Conduct

The Publications and Communications Group (PUBCOM), as part of its Terms of Reference, deals with financial and editorial matters related to the ICES Journal of Marine Science (IJMS). During two consecutive years, 2015, and 2016 respectively a perceived Conflict of Interest arose within PUBCOM, associated with the appointment of the PUBCOM Chairs, as (Associate) Editor-in-Chiefs of Marine Journals with overlapping/competing ambition and scope. During 2015 a well-researched and detailed document was prepared by the SCICOM Chair, a designated SCICOM member, and the First-Vice president, to resolve the issue of the PUBCOM Chair. Bureau accepted the resignation in 2015 of the PUBCOM Chair, specifically based on the advice from two external cooperation partners, Oxford University Press (OUP – publisher of the IJMS) and the Committee on Publications Ethics (COPE) that a COI exists. The Bureau Statement, together with the background document was distributed within the ICES community. In August/September 2016 a similar situation occurred in PUBCOM.

In order to deal with COI situations at ICES in the future, Bureau has developed a policy document on COI, including an outline for a process to be considered prior to and when COI situations arise.

It should be noted that the issue of Conflict of Interest is not trivial, and that it will never be possible to describe in detail all situations that might arise, nor will it be possible to describe in detail how to handle all situations. Apart from providing guidance in specific situations the aim of the CoI policy is also to create an internal environment within ICES, allowing for CoI to be openly discussed, to the benefit of the organization and the individual person.

The document should also serve as an external communication on Conflict of Interest being considered and handled within ICES, ensuring ICES is considered as an independent knowledge provider, guided by integrity and objectivity.

Council is invited to adopt the ICES Conflict of Interest Policy and Code of Conduct.

ICES Conflict of Interest Policy (CoI)

As a knowledge provider ICES depends both on the expertise of its participants, and on the perception of cooperation partners that ICES is independent, guided by integrity and objectivity

ICES must facilitate a transparent and consistent handling of situations where conflicts of interest (COI) may arise, to avoid the creation of an appearance of impropriety that can undermine confidence in the person.

ICES stresses the importance to develop and sustain an open organizational culture where COI/measures dealing with COI can be freely raised and discussed.

The ICES Code of Conduct outlines how to address Conflicts of Interest.

ICES Code of Conduct (CoC)

The Code of Conduct consists of four components:

I Guiding principles for participating in ICES work

Recalling the vision and the mission of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, all those contributing to the work of ICES are expected to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with scientific independence, integrity, and impartiality.

II Definition of COI

In the context of this policy a conflict of interest means any interest by a participant that may affect or reasonably be perceived to affect the participants objectivity and independence in carrying out his/her work. A conflict of interest may exist even if no unethical or improper act results from it. The holding of interests does not automatically give rise to a conflict of interest, if the independence and objectivity of work to be carried out are not at risk.

III Declaration of interests

It is the responsibility of both the Chairs of the meetings as well as the national delegates (who nominate experts to participate in ICES work) to make the nominated participants aware of the ICES Conflict of Interest Policy.

The Chair should address the issues of Conflict of Interest in advance of, and at the beginning of each meeting. Meeting participants should be reminded of the duty to declare any interests in advance of the meeting/commencement of work.

The primary responsibility for assessing whether an interest might impede independence or influence judgement and for declaring any possible conflict of interest is placed on the person concerned.

IV How to proceed when a potential or perceived COI is identified

It is recognized that it is often difficult to objectively assess whether a conflict of interest situation exists.

In case of a potential/perceived COI, the procedure outlined below should be followed:

- the Expert Group/Committee Chair shall be notified with a short explanation of the nature of the potential conflict of interest, and will make a decision on the participation of the person in question. The Chair will inform the Secretariat and the national delegate about the decision;
- if the Chair finds that there is a need for further follow-up, the Chair will notify the Secretariat who will engage with the national delegate and share with the relevant committee;

- if uncertainty remains as to how to proceed when a potential or perceived COI is communicated, the Chair will ask the Secretariat to give guidance.

- if there is still uncertainty (following consultation with the Chair/Secretariat/Coordination Group) about how to proceed given a potential or perceived COI, the Secretariat will ask the Bureau to make a decision.

To assess the extent of CoI, and ensure that it is being addressed in a consistent and transparent manner, Bureau will be provided with an annual report on CoI issues within ICES, and how they have been handled.

These issues will be discussed in the Coordination Group, to ensure dissemination of information across the organization, as well as consistency and transparency in the way issues are handled.