



EP(21)18

## Open letter to EU Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius

### RE.: European Commission “explanatory note” on the revision of the EU-fisheries control system

Dear Commissioner Sinkevičius,

Last week an “explanatory note” on the revision of the EU-fisheries control system<sup>1</sup> was reportedly circulated by your services among certain Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), mainly within the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, warning them about the potential implications of some amendments democratically adopted in the Committee on Fisheries (PECH) which, and we quote, “*could reward and legalise underreporting, lead to massive overfishing and allow illegal discards to continue undetected and threaten the sustainable exploitation of marine biological resources*”.

Our fleets would like to recall their commitment to an effective control policy for vessels operating within and outside European waters, which guarantees the proper implementation of EU legislation and the achievement of the common objectives of the CFP. Proof of that is that on average, in the Atlantic, fishing pressure has been reduced almost by half over the last 20 years, reaching maximum sustainable yield (MSY) levels for the majority of the fish stocks. Fish populations have been increasing significantly, reaching in 2018 levels 50% higher than in 2010. Almost 100% of the landings come from stocks at MSY levels<sup>2</sup>.

Contrary to the allegations of and mistrust in the fishing industry contained in the Commission's explanatory note, the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) figures<sup>3</sup> show that despite the increase of inspections at sea, the actual number of infringements remain extremely low (less than 4%), particularly in the Atlantic (less than 2%). Therefore, there is already a culture of compliance in the EU and a working control system in place, something that should be acknowledged and celebrated.

The abovementioned statistics show EU fishers as champions of responsible fishing, servicing consumers with healthy seafood in a scenario of heavy global competition. Something that had been achieved even before the introduction of the current landing obligation as laid down in article 15 of the Common Fishery Policy. The truth is that the landing obligation in its current form is a failed policy, unfit for a Common Fisheries Policy that, overall, has delivered sustainable seafood production. The Commissioner has apparently decided to enforce this unworkable policy through the introduction of intrusive control and monitoring tools that ignore data protection and business confidentiality and goes against workers' rights.

Why so much intolerance and mistrust placed on a responsible sector that has sacrificed so much over the last two decades? The downsizing of the EU fishing fleet by more than 20,000 vessels, the compliance with hefty quota reductions, the ensuing employment reduction and, consequently, the ageing of both the remaining fleet and its workforce, are sacrifices that seem ignored and forgotten.

Beyond the skewed content of the note, what is most shocking to Europeche is the fact that the note seems to be aimed only at a reduced group of like-minded MEPs with the sole apparent goal of generating political support and momentum to crush the Parliamentary position democratically adopted by the Members of the PECH committee. The decisions taken in this specialized Parliamentary Committee were based on the best available science, expertise and knowledge of its members.

In our view, the Parliament must be a sovereign and independent institution to take its own decisions, free of interference by the Commission which already is proponent of the law and participates in the PECH debates when requested by its Members. To try to further its role beyond that, seeking to impose its own position and by-passing the relevant MEPs in charge of this file, constitutes for us an offence against the delicate balance of power between the EU Institutions.

Against this scenario, European fishers can only feel outraged and abandoned by a European Commission who portrays its own fishing industry as illegal predators and cheaters. This certainly is the unanimous feeling among our members, all of whom perceive this attitude as a complete lack of connection and empathy with fishers and fisheries' realities that are the seed of an increasing anti-EU sentiment among fishers.

We can assure you that EU fishers and their organisations wish to have a continued constructive partnership with the European Commission, but this seems increasingly more difficult when DG MARE considers and describes its own industry as a destructive force.

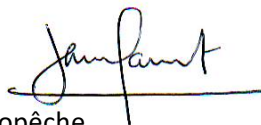
These unfounded allegations add up to the long list of existing problems that the EU fishing industry must already cope with and for which it needs the political support of the European Commission and its Fisheries Commissioner. The Brexit outcome, the implementation of the post Brexit situation in the North Sea and the NE Atlantic, the spatial claims on fishing grounds by renewable energy and marine protected areas as well as the on-going market impact of Covid-19, just to name a few of them.

Fishers have the perception to be a problem for the European Commission rather than a source of sustainable and healthy food, providing the perfect protein to EU consumers with the lowest carbon footprint and a source of decent employment. Fishers feel threatened by the increasing replacement of their catch by cheap foreign fish produced under poor labour conditions, poor control and monitoring systems and benefiting from increasing tariff exemptions<sup>4</sup> that make EU fishing companies to compete in an unlevel playing field in our own market.

In light of the above, Europeche urges the Commission to stop casting a shadow of suspicion on the sector and its compliance as a whole. We also urge the Commission to respect the democratic decisions adopted by specialized Parliamentary Committees. The debate on complex and technical issues, such as the control regulation, should be done in a transparent manner and always seeking the outcome of rational policies. That is what the fishing community of the European Union needs, clear and implementable policies.

Yours sincerely,

Javier Garat  
President of Europeche



1. See Link <http://europeche.chil.me/download-doc/342909>

2. See press release on "Monitoring the performance of the Common Fisheries Policy (STECF-Adhoc-20-01)"

[<https://europeche.chil.me/post/5025-more-fish-at-sea-in-only-ten-years-overfishing-in-the-eu-is-at-an-all-time—297925>]

[<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC120481/kj-ax-20-002-en-n.pdf>]

3. EFCA Annual Report 2019 (page 15)

[<https://www.efca.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EFCA Annual Report for year 2019.pdf>]

JDPs	Inspections		Inspections with at least one suspected infringement	
	2018	2019*	2018	2019*
NORTH SEA	14 439	13 656	185	112
BALTIC SEA	4 162	4 286	65	111
NAFO & NEAFC	60	67	6	6
WESTERN WATERS	2 699	2 901	164	129
MEDITERRANEAN SEA	5 562	9 327	214	787
BLACK SEA		2 144		21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26 922</b>	<b>32 381</b>	<b>634</b>	<b>1 166</b>

4. 700.000 tonnes duty free imports from fisheries Autonomous Tariff Quotas