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Worst fears against active bottom mobile fishing gears come true

The European Commission has turned a blind eye to its own fisheries management system and proposes a gradual phase out of bottom mobile gears in 30% of EU waters

25% of the EU fish production and 7 000 vessels at risk

After months of delays, the European Commission has unveiled today its 'EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries'. Citizens may have expected an effective package against the biggest threats to the ocean such as pollution, ocean warming, plastic or climate change. In turn, the Commission has decided to greenwash ocean protection through fisheries bans. The target, phasing out bottom mobile gears without offering any real alternative. The Commission not only neglects the fact these 7 000 vessels contribute 25% of the total landings but also generate 38% of total revenues by the EU fleet. This policy will devastate entire EU fishing communities. But there will be one clear beneficiary: non-EU bottom trawlers. These vessels will increase seafood export into the EU to fill the gap left by the EU fleet and without facing any of these prohibitions.

The Action Plan is part of the EU Biodiversity Strategy establishing the objective to provide legal protection of 30% of the Union waters by 2030. In the document, the Commission instructs Member States to gradually phase out bottom mobile gears in these protected areas while keeping a role of facilitator and supporter.

Iván López van der Veen, Chair of the EBFA, declared: *"We appreciate the efforts made by DG MARE to channel this process through regionalisation, instead of proposing a legally binding law at EU level. However, the political mandate is clear and leaves Member States in an extremely weak position since any new MPA designation will automatically exclude bottom fishing, no matter what science says. Also, given the fact that this is not an EU law, citizens and companies affected have no right to go to court to protect them from the disproportionate impact of the action plan, leaving them defenseless. Our plea is for the Council and the European Parliament to stop this non-sense. Member states such as France and Spain have successful and praised MPA management models that will be rendered useless, discarding overnight a model based on full cooperation and integration of all stakeholders."*

The EBFA therefore considers the prohibition by default of bottom mobile gears in MPAs as an objective clearly disproportionate, unjustified, not based on the best available science and contrary to international commitments. Mr López commented: *"MPAs offer different degrees of protection and may be established for the conservation of other natural resources such as mammals, birds or turtles, not the seabed. Then why punishing and banning a perfectly regulated activity that does not disturb the conservation of the habitat or species that precisely justify the MPA? Management measures are adapted to each local case, which differs from the broad-brush approach taken by the Commission, imposing blanket bans."*

In order to justify the ban, the Commission explains that compensation will come from the recovery of fish stocks and movement of commercially exploitable fish from MPAs to other fishing areas (spill-over effects). Mr López commented: *“99% of the landings from EU managed stocks in the North East Atlantic come from species fished at maximum sustainable yield levels. What recovery is the Commission talking about? The only effect that we know for sure, also recognized by the Commission, is the displacement of fishing effort to other fishing areas, which will increase fuel consumption, inaccessibility to target species and undesired consequences in the management of the fisheries and areas concerned. Fishing all species with a single gear is not possible, and if it was, it would not be without consequences, including for the environment. If the Commission wants to change the CFP it must do so following the established process: through the Parliament, only elected body of the EU institutions, and the Council, not through a backdoor.”*

In this context, the EBFA believes that the impact of fisheries is highly misunderstood. Capture fisheries transforms ecosystems very little since there is no use of pesticides, antibiotics, water, soil erosion or infrastructure installation. The sector recalls that marine protected areas do not reduce fishing pressure, they just move it somewhere else. In terms of fish abundance, MPAs are only effective in absence of fisheries management and the EU has been very effective in managing its marine resources as outlined in the CFP evaluation report.

The Commission also recognized that a potential ban of bottom mobile gears in current MPAs (10%) can cause an overall economic impact of around 870 million EUR per year¹. This significant economic loss will triple in less than a decade since the total area to be protected in the EU will increase from 10% to 30% by 2030. These figures do not include the cost of displacement nor the cost of substituting the loss of marine protein by other sources.

The EBFA also questions how the Commission intends to use public funding to support this process. Is it part of it going to be used for decommissioning schemes or for vessel transformation? The costs and technical impediments of changing from one gear to another makes this approach unattainable. Not to talk about the waste of public money in science, management and selectivity if bottom trawling is banned.

The EBFA warns that the EU is already heavily dependent on whitefish imports caught by bottom trawlers from 3rd countries. Mr López concluded: *“70% of the seafood consumed in Europe is imported. The Action Plan would only increase the (sea)food security gap in favour of countries like Russia, whose ruthless invasion of Ukraine is explicitly mentioned in the text. Nonetheless, the EU still permits the import of fish products from this country without restrictions - opposite to other Western countries - while adopting policies, like the action plan, which will only accrue our dependency on fish imports from this country.”*

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¹ 290 million EUR in the potential reduction of value of landings for the EU fleets direct impact and around 580 million EUR in other ancillary activities onshore indirect impacts across the value chain.