

Europêche meets Member States to prepare for next legislative term

- *Europêche shared the frustration voiced by farmers regarding imbalanced and unworkable EU policies strangling fishing companies across the EU*
- *Europêche calls to elevate primary production high in the future Commission's structure to safeguard the sector's vital contribution to food sovereignty*
- *Given Norway's aggressive stance against EU fishing interests post-Brexit, Europêche calls for rejection of the EEA Financial Mechanism 2021-2028*

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As the EU navigates towards the final stages of this legislative period (2019-2024), Europêche addressed and exchanged views with Member States on the future structure of the European Commission and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The European fishing industry calls on EU capitals to rebalance the different objectives of the CFP by strengthening the socio-economic and food security dimensions and ensuring that European fishers remain internationally competitive. Moreover, the sector urged Member States to send a strong signal against the disloyal attitude of Norway towards EU fishing rights by rejecting the EEA Financial Mechanism 2021-2028. Also, the industry stressed ongoing issues with nature protection rules and the upcoming implementation of fisheries control system.

1. Future CFP and European Commission structure

Concerns were raised over the current imbalance between environmental and fisheries policies within the European Commission's portfolio and policies. As a result, last year, fishers heavily protested across the EU against the increasing area closures and the Commission proposal to phase out bottom fishing. Now, Europe's farmer protests are spreading. They are protesting against shared concerns regarding excessive EU regulations, pricing pressures, and the EU support to cheap imports with increasing tax derogations. Europêche called for an urgent surgical revision of failed EU policies such as the landing obligation. According to Europêche, the EU needs to return to a model where primary food production is placed high in the Commission's agenda and structure, separate from environment, and that needs to happen in the next mandate of the European Commission (2024-2029).

2. Fish tax derogations granted to Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism 2021-2028:

The fishing industry expressed frustration and irritation with Norway's aggressive stance against EU fishing interests, citing actions such as unlawful cod quota grabs, bans of traditional EU fishing methods (e.g., beam trawl) in Norway's waters and setting excessive, unjustified unilaterally mackerel quotas, leading to overfishing. Europêche called on Member States to block the EEA agreement and stop the continuation of tax derogations to Norway's fisheries products entering the EU market. In this sense, Europêche advocates for the EEA agreement to incorporate a direct link between trade access and fisheries management, similar to the arrangement in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) with the UK.

3. Action Plan to protect and restore marine ecosystems

Europêche and the Chair of EBFA¹, reiterated the strong criticism from the Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee towards the Commission's Action Plan to protect marine ecosystems. In their respective positions, the plan was deemed overly simplistic, lacking a foundation in the best available science, neglecting focus on food security, and lacking an impact assessment. The Plan lacks a legally binding nature, and therefore, the Commission appears to be attempting to legislate through a "back door". The sector called for a different approach for the next legislative term, on a case-by-case basis and in direct contact with the sector.

Although not specifically addressed during the meeting, Europêche is deeply concerned about the manner in which the UK is implementing Marine Protected Areas in its waters, exceeding the recommendations of scientists and mainly impeding the operations of EU fishing vessels. In this regard, the European Commission, as the guardian of the Treaties, must ensure that the designation of MPAs within the UK's jurisdiction is non-discriminatory, science-based and proportionate. Europêche firmly believes that the Commission should take this issue seriously and utilize all measures provided within the TCA to rectify the situation. Conservation objectives should never be employed as a means to restrict EU access to UK waters, preventing EU vessels from catching their rightful fishing quotas.

4. Fisheries Control Regulation: Implementing rules

In January 2024 entered into force the new EU fisheries control system. The goal: modernising and simplifying control and enforcement measures adopted back in 2009. The Commission has initiated the implementation phase of the rules, which must be both workable and cost-effective while also ensuring effectiveness and fairness. However, the sector is already appalled by the first implementing act on the margin of tolerance. To implement the flexibilities granted by co-legislators, the Commission, in its implementing act, proposes to enforce stricter control measures in third countries than those applied in the EU, making it impossible to apply the flexibility in foreign ports, especially those located in developing countries. Europêche questions why the Commission is imposing such unattainable measures to EU vessels, while having no issue in accepting fishery products landed by Asian vessels in the same foreign ports not subject to any of the proposed EU control rules.

Likewise, Europêche asked Member States to push the Commission to propose as soon as possible exemptions for the separate stowage of certain demersal species subject to multiannual plans. This is an important flexibility provided by the new law due to reasons such as limited storage space on board, the high number of different stocks caught in certain fisheries, or out of concern for the safety of the crew.

Europêche recalled that the mandatory roll-out of CCTV in the EU will not suddenly make the landing obligation regime workable nor will it prevent unwanted catches from reaching the fishing nets. Same rationale applies to the mandatory introduction of engine power monitoring devices for certain vessels. Europêche regrets that new digital tools are implemented to monitor and survey failed policies. In this context, Europêche emphasized the need for collaborative and pragmatic approaches to address these issues and ensure the sector's long-term viability.

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¹ European Bottom Fishing Alliance <https://bottomfishingalliance.eu/>