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EU fishing industry disappointed at massive tariff derogations for imported fishery products

- Press release -

This week, the Council adopted a regulation setting autonomous EU tariff quotas (ATQs) for certain fishery products for the years 2019 and 2020. The ATQ regulation covers species such as tuna, Alaska pollack, cod or flatfish for which a relatively high volume can be imported from non-EU countries at a reduced or zero-duty tariff. Up to 750.000 tonnes of fish will benefit from this scheme and will enter the European markets regardless of their origin, way of production, sustainability of the stock, labour standards or even if the third country has been identified by the EU for illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Europêche believes that, in many cases, ATQs serve the sole purpose of getting a better price from non-EU producers, while putting pressure on EU producers' prices and employment.

Customs duties are levied on imports of products from non-EU countries. These payments accrue directly to the EU budget. Every two or three years, the EU takes a decision on the volume of fish for which the duties are suspended or reduced. There has been a constant trend to increase the amount of tonnes exempted from import duties in the EU. While in 1992, only 6 species representing 43.000 tonnes were granted reduced import duties, this week, the EU has decided to grant a zero-duty tariff to more than 15 species representing 750.000 tonnes. This growing trend translates in a loss of direct income for the EU which must be compensated by other financial means such as European tax-payers' money.

Europêche is not opposed to a rational tariff free setting for certain fishery products that are not sufficiently produced in the EU. However, fish stocks have recovered over the last decade and led to an increase of EU fishing fleet catches and landings. Therefore, the EU catching sector is currently meeting the needs of EU processors, providing the best quality fish whilst maintaining the highest standards. Contrary to these positive developments, the EU, at the request of EU importing and processing companies, has decided to increase the amount of tonnes that can be imported from third countries at a zero-duty tariff for many species.

Europêche recalls that it is in the gutting and cleaning of the fish where the greatest number of jobs is required for the EU processing industry. The fishing industry therefore argues that increased imports of fish fillets and loins already processed in third countries to the EU will result in a loss of said jobs and a decrease in prices. As a consequence of the latter factor, ATQs with a zero tariff duty also forces the EU catching sector to sell their product in other international markets in search for better prices.

Javier Garat, President of Europêche, declared: "*We cannot longer guarantee privileged access in the EU market to products that do not respect social and environmental standards such as those supplied by China or Thailand, while requiring our industry to comply with the highest standards of sustainability such as good fisheries management, control, working conditions, health, safety, training, hygiene and sustainability of the resources. It is therefore paramount to address legal gaps in the current control Regulation and step up efforts in sanitary controls and IUU inspections to ensure that fishery products entering the EU market from third countries are legal as well as sustainable.*"

Mr Garat concluded: “*It is not acceptable that countries which are linked to IUU fishing and serious labour abuses benefit from preferential market access; it should be rather the opposite. The EU should have the ambition to step up its game and work towards achieving a true level playing field between EU produced and third country produced seafood. The EU is sending the wrong message to the international community rewarding those who have done little for the sustainability of fish stocks and fair treatment of people.*”

Europêche firmly believes that the processing sector has a legitimate and important role to play in supplying healthy and sufficient quantities of seafood to EU citizens. However, we are of the opinion that, in light of the socio-economic consequences of ATQs to the EU fishing industry, this instrument must be solely used when there is no sufficient seafood supply for our markets and cannot be intended to import non-sustainable products nor put pressure on EU producers' prices.

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