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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES
The Director-General

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Mr Giampolo Buonfiglio
Chairman
MEDAC
c/o Ministero delle Politiche
Agricole, Alimentari, Forestali e del
Turismo
Via XX Settembre, 20
00187 Roma
ITALY

Subject: OIG position on COVID-19 and fisheries

Your references: 105/2020

Dear Mr Buonfiglio,

Thank you for your letter of 29 April 2020, giving the OIG position on the impact of COVID-19 on the fishery sector in the Mediterranean Sea. I am aware that it complements the other letter we received from the sector at the end of March and to which we already answered.[1]

Your letter makes some important points about the impact of the current crisis on the management of fisheries going forward. I agree with you that the ongoing, unique, situation, might be a game changer in the way we will manage fisheries in the Mediterranean.

Firstly, the current crisis inevitably makes fisheries control challenging. It should not be used as an excuse to lower our control standards and slide back on the fight against IUU. The Commission, together with EFCA, is closely monitoring the situation and the performance of control activities in the Mediterranean by the Member States. EFCA, together with the Member States, is doing its utmost to reallocate resources and rebalance priorities to be able to deliver despite the COVID-19 constraints. You also highlight in your letter that technology can help in the face of these constraints. I agree with you that the use of REM is even more pertinent now.

[1] See Ares(2020)2289462 dated 29 April 2020.

Secondly, as your letter points out, we need to prepare the crisis exit. The current turbulent times should not affect our ambitions for reforming fisheries management in the Mediterranean, as spelled out in the MedFish4Ever Declaration. The case of the small pelagic fishery in the Adriatic is a case in point: it is important to put in place a fully-fledged plan for the management of this fishery. Our efforts to turn the MedFish4Ever political commitments into action will continue unabated, notably to improve fisheries management and control, establish new Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs), improve science and compliance, and address small scale fisheries as well as recreational fisheries. All of this will require an even stronger level of cooperation across the Mediterranean basin with our non-EU GFCM partners, towards a level-playing field between all Mediterranean fishermen. The MedFish4Ever Ministerial Conference that the GFCM will organise next year in the spring will be an opportunity to take stock of progress and revive the reform momentum with our non-EU partners, and should also allow to translate this ambition in the future GFCM Strategy for 2021-2025.

More than ever, I count on MEDAC to support the Commission in the run-up to the next annual session in 2021, especially as regards the development of the future GFCM strategy, the future management plan for small pelagic fisheries in the Adriatic, the establishment of new FRAs, measures for recreational fisheries, and the improvement of selectivity and the protection of sensitive species.

However, it is important that the EU's efforts take due account of the new reality that will emerge from the crisis. In particular, we will need to take stock of the new fishery landscape and draw some lessons. For instance, as you pointed out, we will need to assess the impact of the crisis in terms of the abundance and recovery of fish stocks. Even in times of crisis, it is of vital importance to maintain the sustainability of the stocks. We should be precautionary in short-term solutions such as roll over to 2021 of unused fishing days that could negatively impact the progress achieved. Another strand of activity could be also, again as you suggested, to improve the situation of small scale fishermen in terms of their position in the supply chain and getting more revenues from their activities.

As far as your recommendations in terms of support to the sector are concerned, I would like to remind some measures that are already available under the Operational Programmes managed by Member States and answer to your recommendations. Let me give you the following examples:

1) Member States may support investments on board or in individual equipment that go beyond the requirements under Union or national law (Art. 32) or investments in the processing of fishery and aquaculture products (Art. 69) in order to improve hygiene, health, safety and working conditions for fishers.
2) Art. 68 of the EMFF provides for support to marketing measures for fishery and aquaculture products, which may cover promoting the quality and the value added and the direct marketing of fishery products by small–scale coastal fishers or by on–foot fishers.
3) To diminish the dependence of the sector as a response to the Covid19 crisis and the change in market and business conditions, the EMFF (Art. 30) may support investments contributing to the diversification of the fishers' income through the development of complementary activities, including investments on board, angling tourism, restaurants, environmental services related to fishing and educational activities concerning fishing.

4) In order to stimulate innovation in fisheries, the EMFF (Art. 26) may support projects aimed at developing or introducing new or substantially improved products and equipment, new or improved processes and techniques, and new or improved management and organisation systems, including at the level of processing and marketing.

All these measures, as well as other measures, are usually already available in Member States' Operational Programmes. In the context of the COVID19, we prepared an information note for Member States reminding all available measures under the EMFF that you will find in annex to this letter. I invite you to distribute this information note to all your members.

Over the last weeks, my staff and I have been in close contact with Member States and with representatives of the fishery and aquaculture sector in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. We have listened to all concerns and requests for targeted mitigation measures to support the fishery and aquaculture sector, and are closely monitoring the developments on the market. The EMFF (European Maritime Fisheries Fund) and the CMO (Common Market Organisation) Regulations were amended in the context of the COVID- 19 outbreak[2] in order to include compensations to fishers (including fishers on foot and inland fishers) for the temporary cessation of fishing activities, financial compensations to aquaculture producers and processing enterprises for the suspension or reduction of production and sales; compensation for additional storage costs; possibility to provide working capital to aquaculture producers and processing enterprises, support to producer organisations for the temporary storage of fishery and aquaculture products.

This is only one part of a broader package available to support the fishery and aquaculture sector, which includes the adoption of a new Temporary State aid Framework (Member States can grant State aid up to EUR 120,000 per undertaking until 31 December 2020), support from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to the financing of working capital in SMEs where necessary as a temporary measure; support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) in order to ensure that workers receive an income and that businesses keep their staff. All these instruments should be mobilised in a strategic and complementary manner by Member States to respond to the crisis in the most appropriate way. The Commission will do its utmost to mobilise all the available instruments that can support the fishery and aquaculture sector in this unprecedented situation.

This crisis more than ever has brought to the fore the importance of a robust and resilient food system that continues to function in all circumstances, capable of ensuring – without disruption - access to a sufficient supply of food for all citizens. The European Green Deal has announced the Farm 2 Fork Strategy as a vehicle to establish European food systems as a global standard of sustainability. Its adoption, even if a bit delayed in the current context, will still be timely. In addition, the European Green Deal, which is the first priority of this Commission, is setting out a new framework to protect our environment, our economy and the quality of life of all European citizens. Its objective is to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. This means that we will need to change how we produce and consume.

[2] See Regulation (EU) 2020/560 of 23 April 2020 (OJ L 130, 24.4.2020, p.11)

Let me thank you for your commitment and very valuable input. I am looking forward to our continued cooperation and invite you to take contact with Ms Pascale Colson, coordinator of the ACs (Pascale.Colson@ec.europa.eu; +32 2 29 56273), should you have any question on this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Bernhard FRIESS
Acting Director-General

Annex: Informative note on EMFF measures that are immediatly availbale to cope with the COVID 19 crisis consequences.

Electronically signed on 19/05/2020 18:06 (UTC+02) in accordance with article 4.2 (Validity of electronic documents) of Commission Decision 2004/563