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MEDAC OPINION

Towards more sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2021

Whereas

European Commission invited MS, ACs and stakeholders to reflect on policy orientations for 2021 set out in the Communication "Towards more sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2021" (COM(2020)248) and to provide feedback to the Commission by 31 August 2020;

According to the Communication in the Mediterranean Sea the Fishing Mortality indicator (F/Fmsy) remained at a very high level for the entire 2003-2017 period and the biomass remained essentially unchanged since 2003, although since 2012 there may have been a slight increase;

The available stock assessments carried out by STECF and GFCM highlight an exploitation status at rates on average well above the sustainability objective of the Common Fisheries Policy. Therefore, EC asks for other vigorous conservation efforts in the Mediterranean Sea, notably with the implementation of the Western Mediterranean MAP for demersal fisheries and many actions taken to deliver on the MedFish4Ever and Sofia Declarations, such as the GFCM Adriatic multiannual plan for demersal fisheries adopted in 2019;

On the other hand, number of vessels, GT and KW in the EU fleet continue to decrease, and so the total employment in the EU fleet in full time equivalents (FTE) has been decreasing on average by 1.2% per year since 2008;

The economic performance of the EU fleet continued to be very good, but not for the Mediterranean and Black Sea, where profitability levels are lower than in other sea basins;

Projections for the economic performance of the Mediterranean fleet in 2020 are highly negative due to the COVID-19 health crisis;

Based on the orientations contained in the Communication, MEDAC, believes that:

According to the Communication report, the instability of dataset used in estimating F/Fmsy trends and the reduced availability of data may have an impact on the reliability of the state of play of the assessed species. Moreover, fisheries resources and the marine ecosystem suffer additional impact

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other than fishing activity[1], such as from pollution, commercial traffic, climate change, marine litter, population pressure and anthropization.

The serious damage to the fishing enterprises and to workers caused by the health emergency COVID-19 shall be taken into account in the fishing opportunities policies for 2021 and, as far as possible, avoid further limitations to fishing activity. Moreover, the cessation produced by fishing vessels due to the COVID-19 crisis must be considered, especially when the management of fishing effort for days of activity has begun in the new MAP[2].

Regarding the Multiannual plan for demersal species in the Western Mediterranean Sea and the MAP for demersal species in the Adriatic Sea, MEDAC does not deem appropriate to foresee further implementations (page 14 of the Communication "3.Specific actions for the Mediterranean and Black Seas") until the inevitable socio-economic consequences of COVID-crisis are not fully assessed. This quantification will have to take into consideration all the sector, including also fishing enterprises ceasing the fishing activity, due to this unforeseen crisis caused by COVID-19[3].
The MEDAC recommends that the EC takes action to carry out studies that can quantify the impact of COVID 19 on the fishery sector, and on effects that the lockdown and reduced fishing pressure may have had on the recovery of stocks and vulnerable marine species. Then, EC should also take into account the real effort reduction that trawlers will implement due to COVID 19 crisis

MEDAC draws EC attention to the constant loss of jobs and on the progressive ageing of employees, both on the sea and at land, often caused by the reduction of the fleet[4] for the implementation of management plans. On the top of this critical situation, please find attached graphs resulting by the responses of the members to a questionnaire drafted by MEDAC, related to the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the sector.
In particular, MEDAC asks for providing in the Communication the percentages of MS commitments on effort reduction for each EU Mediterranean country in the next years, if available, not considering only the Italian case (pg.14).

Finally, MEDAC invites EC to fully implement existing EU legislation aimed at tackling the drivers that causes biodiversity loss and to implement studies on factors that have an impact on the marine ecosystems and habitat, as well as studies on recovery options that can increase biodiversity, improve the health of fish stocks and the resilience of the Mediterranean Sea to climate change and other sources of impacts.

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[1] Birdlife, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF do not agree with "*other than fishing activity*"

[2] Birdlife, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF support the replacement of the sentence with the following: *"The serious damage to the fishing enterprises and to workers caused by the health emergency COVID-19 has been promptly taken into account by the EU and contributions to transition the fishery sector through the economic crisis connected with the pandemic, are being released by the Commission and Member States".*

[3] Birdlife, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF do not agree with this sentence because the economic impact of COVID-19 should not come at the expenses of the ecosystem. It is ok to assess the economic impact of the pandemic to the industry and to transition fisheries throughout the crisis with economic support by EC and MS, however management measures agreed, should not be changed.

[4] Birdlife, Legambiente, MedReact, WWF add the "fish stock crisis" to the "reduction of the fleet".