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MEDAC advice on the selectivity improvement and compensation mechanism in the West Med

Background note - During the last meeting of MEDAC Focus Group on Western Mediterranean, held on 18 October, the representative of DG MARE requested some advice on the following issues in view of the next steps in the implementation of the MAP (Reg. EU 2019/1022 of 20 June 2019 Establishing a multiannual plan for the fisheries exploiting demersal stocks in the western Mediterranean Sea):

1) Viable alternative solutions to improve the status of Hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) in all areas, Norway Lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*) in GSA 6 and in GSA 9, Red and Blue Shrimp (*Aristeus antennatus*) in GSA 1-2 and 6-7, and Red mullet (*Mullus barbatus*) in GSA 1 and 6, as their stocks remain at risk.

What are your suggestions, bearing in mind that the EC might consider modifying the current percentage of compensation in fishing days (2%) depending on the effectiveness of the proposals suggested by the MEDAC? The compensation mechanism through the additional allocation of fishing days up to 2% (Annex III of Regulation (EU) 2022/110) can in no way compensate for the losses that would be generated with the use of the 52 mm square mesh, as recognised by the studies carried out by the scientific teams (IEO). As noted below, in the same formulation made by the EC, not even the combination of this compensation measures (allocation of additional fishing days) with the possible partial support from the EMFAF, would make it possible to avoid losses that could only be partially compensated. In this respect, the conclusion is that the compensation mechanism provided for in Annex III of Regulation (EU) 2022/110 would be, on the one hand, totally derisory as a supposed compensation tool in the small percentage foreseen and, on the other hand, inadequate as it would be deducted from the fishing days allocated to the Member State. It is necessary to compensate for the significant losses that may occur, and, in this sense, **the mechanism should provide for a higher percentage (10%) and the days should be an extraordinary additional allocation to the Member State**, so they are not subtracted from the original allocation.

Moreover, the unexploited fishing days in 2022 should be recovered in 2023 by each fishing vessel.

It is also necessary **to improve the scientific studies that are still in progress to find out the real yield of 45 and 50 mm square meshes**, in terms of selectivity, for coastal and deep-sea fisheries respectively, as well as to work on the proposal and analysis of other possible complementary or alternative selectivity measures that could be appropriate.

Moreover, the MEDAC suggests a wider use of Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRA) as a complementary measure to improve selectivity. This management measure has been already suggested in the previous MEDAC advice and FRAs can effectively support fish stock recovery, when well designed and implemented, as the Jabuka/Pomo FRA shows.

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2) **What are your views on the possible implementation of the 52 mm square mesh codend?**

The results of the study carried out in the North-Western Mediterranean, and presented during the GFCM WGFiT meeting and the MEDAC FG on WestMed, highlighted that:
- The 52 mm square mesh codend effectively improves selectivity with a reduction in hake discards.
- there is an economic loss for the main commercial categories (32% and 28% reduction in yield for hake and red mullet, respectively)
- Yield recovery: 30% and 20% Y/R increase for Hake and Mullet, respectively, after 4 - 4.5 years of implementation. Initial unsustainable losses after the implementation of the 52 mm square codend could be partially supported by EMFAF and compensation for fishing days.

These results highlight that the use of 52 mm mesh generates significant economic losses that are effectively unsustainable. The project is titled IMPLEMED ("*Improving the selectivity of trawl gears in the Mediterranean Sea to advance the sustainable exploitation pattern of trawl fisheries*"), developed by the IEO in the GSA6, and focusing on Hake and red and blue Shrimp. The MEDAC deems appropriate to receive more details on the justification for the use of 52 mm mesh for the trials carried out by the IEO, since studies are still in progress with 45 mm square mesh for coastal fishing and with 50 mm square mesh for deep-sea fishing (red shrimp). The IMPLEMED Project showed that the 52 mm square mesh codend improved the selectivity compared to the 40 mm square mesh codend with significant losses in yields of commercial sizes: 32% loss of profit for hake and 28% for mullet. While the economic losses reach 27% compared to the 40 mm square mesh codend. **Therefore, the conclusion of the study carried out by the IEO was that the losses generated by the use of 52 mm square mesh codend are unsustainable, making its use unviable, unless economic aid were available to compensate for the significant losses that are generated.**
Furthermore, it is important to underline that the coastal fishing in the Mediterranean is characterised by its multi-species, including others than hake, red mullet or shrimps. The adoption of alternative solutions must remain on a voluntary basis for each Member States. In this respect, the application of selectivity measures should consider the reality and specificities of the fisheries of the Mediterranean Sea. **The MEDAC deems appropriate to rely on the results of these studies to guarantee worthy compensation for all vessels up to the calculated economic losses if mandatory selectivity measures will be implemented. Without these guarantees (prior socioeconomic impact study and financial compensations), every selectivity additional measure is unacceptable. Therefore, it is more appropriate the strengthening of research and analysis on the use of 45 and 50 mm square mesh, as well as on other possible selectivity measures which are better and more appropriate.** Moreover, the MEDAC suggests a wider use of FRAs as a complementary measure to improve selectivity.

During the FG WestMed meeting, the official information was that a concrete proposal for the Western Mediterranean is still pending and that scientific advice is still awaited. It was also explained that the EC will send a total of 19 proposals of decisions at the forthcoming GFCM Annual Session, to be held in Tirana (Albania). Most of these proposals are based on a new criterion for the MAPs, which is that they will be implemented in the long term, fixed on the 2030 Horizon, and will therefore have a total duration of 8 years, with the first 3 years of transition and the last 5 years of actual implementation. Taking into consideration the abovementioned need of greater efforts on scientific

studies on selectivity measures or other possible measures, the MEDAC considers necessary to postpone the date for reaching the MSY of the WestMed MAP to 1 January 2030 to avoid the closure and irremediable loss of the productive sector of commercial fisheries.

The MEDAC highlights that at the mid-term of the WestMed MAP implementation, the economic and social impacts are leading to the loss of several vessels and fishers (represented by Producers' Organisations, Cofradias, Cooperatives, Associations, etc). As example, the work carried out and presented at the MEDAC Focus Group held on 18 October by the coordinator "Evaluation of the socio-economic impact of the MAP, at the mid-term point", showed the serious impact that the WestMed MAP has on the revenues of the micro-fishing enterprises. A further example is the study carried out by WG5, presented by its coordinator last June. This study underlined that, despite the entry into force of various EU Regulations (such as EU Reg. 1967/2006, EU Reg. 1380/2013, EU Reg. 2019/1241, etc.) aimed to give stability to the fishing sector since 2008, there has been a constant reduction of the fleet (with percentages ranging from -15% to - 24%) and of fishing effort (reducing working days by between -18% to -24%).
This trend has not had the expected effect in the value of catches. Therefore, the socioeconomic impact of the revenue's reduction is causing the decreasing of crews, and there is no generational turnover as the fishing activity becomes less and less attractive.

Finally, the official information is that no proposals of decisions will be sent by EC to the forthcoming GFCM annual session related to Black Sea due to the crisis caused by the invasion of Ukraine. The MEDAC highlights that the effects of the Ukrainian invasion and the fuel crisis are spreading to the entire Mediterranean Sea, causing a great increase in the operational costs and the socio-economic consequences on the EU fishing sector is being seriously threatened. In this sense, the current EU MAPs cannot continue to be implemented until the crisis will be concluded.