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MEDAC advice on the forthcoming MAP for the small pelagic in the Adriatic Sea

During the Adriatic FG held on 9 April, the DG MARE representatives invited the MEDAC to share some advice on the forthcoming long-term management measures to be adopted in the framework of Rec. GFCM/44/2021/20 on a multiannual management plan for the sustainable exploitation of small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic Sea (GSA 17-18).

The MEDAC reiterates the key elements already raised up in the previous letter and advice (Ref.29/2024 and 44/2024) especially related to the fact that the relevant GFCM experts should exemplify their questions if they deem needed a real stakeholder input, as it has been done for other species (MSE bluefin tuna ICCAT).

During the meeting special attention has been paid to the reasons behind the difficulties for the fleet involved in the area in reaching the available quotas. As referred by the LEK (Local Ecological Knowledge) of the MEDAC members operating in the area, these reasons can be related to:

- No generational turnover, causing a growing difficulty in completing the crews, and then the fishing days loss
- Increase of operating costs of fishing activities
- a significant recovery of bluefin tuna stock which, given the high levels of daily energy requirements of the species, may have become an important factor in the decrease of small pelagic stock;
- a progressive decrease in the trophic level of the water due to the reduction of the nutrient load from rivers (nitrate directives, greater attention to the purification of urban discharges, etc.), which may have reduced the abundance and phyto-zoplanktonic biodiversity, causing a decrease in the biomass of small pelagic in the Adriatic Sea due to inter- and intra-specific food competition. Similar occurrences have already been observed in other Mediterranean locations characterised by important river inputs (Gulf of Lion). In the same direction of reduction of the phyto-zooplankton biomass, the ongoing climatic changes are also working, with their negative effects mainly caused by the rise in water temperature.

About the quota's allocation at national level, one possible solution could be that it will be managed by the fishery operators themselves, preferably through the POs.
The scientific research, on the basis of which national fishing quotas are allocated, should then extend its scope of investigation beyond the mere assessment of the size of the resource, considering more carefully at least those issues that seem to be more related to the problem of the low stock size of small pelagic, such as the possible reduction of nutrient supply and consequently of phyto-zooplanktonic '*pabulum*' and the excessive abundance of first and second level predators

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As far as the temporal closures are concerned, socioeconomic support to the fishing enterprises is needed when they observe biological closure in favour of the necessary stock recovery, as it already happens for demersal fleets and as it has been defined by Art. 21 of the EMFAF (support of the fishing activity during the temporary cessation for conservation measure).

For these reasons, MEDAC deems needed to radically change the management approach for small pelagic fisheries. Moreover, despite the substantial reduction in fishing effort in recent years, official data collection shows that the quotas allocated in 2022 are not being met by any of the Member States concerned. There has thus been no positive response to a management approach that has been in place for several years. Moreover, some scientific evidence suggests that professional fishing activity is no longer to be considered the main cause of the decline in small pelagic stocks in the Mediterranean. Therefore, the scientific assessment on which management decisions are based should no longer focus exclusively on fishing effort, but it should have a holistic approach. A viable small pelagic fisheries management system should over time be able to ensure stability and economic and social sustainability of the fishery; so far this has not been the case. **It is not a request for more fishing opportunities, but it is an alarm in response to a situation that seems to indicate that the current management system is not working properly**.