

# Common Fisheries Policy CFP: establishment of Regional Advisory Councils

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This report presents the Commission's analysis and evaluation of the current framework for the functioning of the Regional Advisory Councils (RACs). It also deals with the RACs' input to the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), highlights current trends and proposes improvements to the consultation process. The Commission's evaluation does not examine the possible development of the RACs' role in the CFP governance system, as defined by Council Regulation No 2371/2002. This should be done in the context of the next CFP reform.

The document makes an **evaluation of the main elements of the general framework** of RACS. The main points are as follows:

- the Commission's view is that, overall, the current **geographical coverage** is satisfactory and that there is no need for additional RACs to be set up. RACs should make use of the possibility of establishing subdivisions to deal with specific issues;

- on **membership**, with regard to the fisheries sector, participation by grassroots interests has not been as significant as had been hoped. With regard to other interests, the Commission would like to see more active participation by aquaculture producers, recreational and sports fishermen and consumers, given the role that these stakeholders play in current policy and market trends affecting the CFP. A number of groups whose membership includes interests from the fisheries sector have asked to join RACs as "other interests". The proliferation of such organisations seeking seats on the Executive Committees is a cause of concern for the Commission, as it risks upsetting the current balance of interests;

- the paper discusses possible adaptations to the current **composition rule** for the general assembly, and for the executive committee. While recognising that RACs should be composed mainly of fishermen, the Commission believes that effective participation by all other interests is essential. To encourage other interest groups to join the RACs, discussions should include broader issues, such as eco-labelling and market trends;

- the Commission examines issues of transparency. It points out that **internal rules of procedure** are not always detailed enough to avoid conflicts of interpretation, provide solutions and guarantee a balance between the different groups. The Commission could propose relevant guidelines to the RACs based on best practice;

- with regard to **participation by non-members**, the Commission looks at the involvement of scientists, Member States and its own experts, and representatives from third countries, as well as the Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture (ACFA).

The document goes on to look at the **input of RACs to the CFP decision-making process**. Overall, the RACs have helped soften hostility towards the CFP, thus facilitating further direct contacts between stakeholders, EU officials, Member States and scientists. However, the RACs are still going through a learning process. In order to agree on common recommendations, stakeholders first need to develop new working methods. Some RACs have benefited from existing regional initiatives, while in other areas /sectors such structures are unprecedented and have faced serious capacity development challenges. This explains why the RACs were not all established at the same time and have not developed their activities at the same pace.

The Commission goes on to examine its **follow-up of RAC advice, which** depends on whether that advice is compatible with CFP objectives and sustainable fisheries. The Commission has repeatedly explained that it cannot follow RAC recommendations when they depart significantly from scientific advice or contradict international obligations or Community long-term management plans. It recognises that it needs to establish clear guidelines, indicating the benchmarks used to evaluate the quality of RAC advice. It looks at possible ways to improve the quality and timeliness of RAC advice.

The Commission concludes that the **current legal framework is generally satisfactory**. There may now be some scope for improvement or clarification of certain provisions of the Decision, and the Commission would like to discuss these issues with all interested parties before eventually proposing amendments.

However, a number of actions can also be implemented in the short term to improve RAC functioning without the need for new legal rules. The Commission will therefore:

- encourage participation by a wider range of stakeholders, by promoting the organisation's image and role;
- improve RACs' access to scientific evidence and data, so that they can fully benefit from the MoU with ICES and from the provisions of the new data collection regulation;
- involve the RACs in reflection on the long-term development of the CFP, including by means of dedicated study trips;
- improve the consultation process by involving the RACs at an earlier stage, giving them sufficient time to respond and providing them with clearer and more easily accessible documents;
- propose benchmarks to improve the consistency of RAC advice with CFP objectives. The Commission will also consider organising annual debriefing meetings with the RACs to discuss its follow-up of their advice;
- improve the visibility of the RACs through the Commission's website; and,
- propose guidelines on the rules of procedure and financial management of Community co-financing;

Despite the difficulties encountered in the start-up phase, the RACs have already made a positive contribution to the development of the CFP.