Special report 12/2011 (2011 discharge): Have EU measures contributed to adapting the capacity of the fishing fleets to available fishing opportunities?

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PURPOSE: to present special report No 12/2011 from the European Court of Auditors (ECA) on whether EU measures contributed to adapting the capacity of EU fishing fleets to available fishing opportunities.

CONTENT: the report recalls that the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) aims to promote sustainable fishing by achieving a balance between fish resources and fishing fleets in order to **avoid overexploitation of fish stocks**. The European Fisheries Fund (EFF) provides € 4.3 billion for the programming period 2007 – 2013 to support the CFP.

This European Court of Auditors' (ECA) **performance audit** assessed whether EU measures effectively contributed to adapting the capacity of the fleets to available fishing opportunities.

The Court examined two main questions:

is the framework for the reduction of fleet capacity clear;

are specific measures well defined and implemented?

The audit was carried out at the Commission and in seven Member States (Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal and the UK) selected on the basis of the size of their fishing fleets and the resources available for adapting their fishing fleets under the EFF.

Court of Auditor's conclusions: the audit concluded that overcapacity of the fishing fleet continues to be one of the main reasons for the failure of the CFP in assuring a sustainable fishing activity. The ECA has previously issued 2 special reports (No 3/1993 and No 7/2007) stressing the **problem of overcapacity**.

Although the reduction of fishing overcapacity has been a recurrent theme in previous reforms of the CFP, current measures have failed.

The ECA found **important weaknesses in the framework**:

- the framework, design and implementation of measures to balance fishing capacity with available fishing opportunities is unsatisfactory;
- the existing definitions of fishing capacity no longer adequately reflect the ability of fishing vessels to catch fish;
- **ceilings do not impose real restrictions on fishing capacity**;
- although the alignment of fishing capacity to fishing opportunities is one of the cornerstones of the CFP and the EFF, fishing overcapacity has not been defined or quantified;
- Member States have not done their part under the CFP to put effective measures in place to match fishing capacity with opportunities;
- four of the seven Member States examined had set inadequate targets for reducing fishing capacity.

Court's recommendations: the ECA makes a series of recommendations to address overcapacity and the sustainability of the fishing sector:

- the Commission should better define fishing capacity and overcapacity and consider more relevant robust measures to facilitate actions balancing fishing capacity with fishing opportunities;
- set effective limits for fishing fleet capacity;
- clarify whether fishing right transfer schemes have a role in reducing fishing overcapacity;
- Member States have to ensure that any measures to aid investments on board are strictly applied and do not increase fishing ability; and ensure that selection criteria for fishing vessel decommissioning schemes are designed to have a positive impact on the sustainability of the targeted fish stocks and avoid providing public aid for decommissioning inactive fishing vessels.