Towards a sustainable and competitive European aquaculture sector: current status and future challenges

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The Committee on Fisheries adopted an own-initiative report by Carlos ITURGAIZ (EPP, ES) entitled ‘towards a sustainable and competitive European aquaculture sector: current status and future challenges’.

The aquaculture sector is an innovative economic sector, which is the fastest growing food production activity, and, potentially, a high-technology sector requiring structural and research investment and long-term operational and financial planning.

In Europe, aquaculture (the farming of finfish, shellfish and aquatic plants) produces nearly 20 % of fish products and currently directly employs some 85 000 people.

Following on from the Commission communication on strategic guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture’, Members made a number of recommendations aimed at developing a growing, dynamic, sustainable and innovative EU aquaculture sector.

Unlocking the potential of EU aquaculture: the report stressed the need to boost its development, diversification and innovation while preserving the proper functioning of marine ecosystems:

- by promoting **higher levels of production** of fish, crustaceans, molluscs, algae and echinoderms from aquaculture;
- by improving the **competitiveness** of such products (to improve EU aquaculture production so that it reaches at least the current global aquaculture growth rate within five years and to encourage investment in more energy-efficient and economical equipment);
- by increasing their **consumption** and contribution to food and nutrition security for EU citizens.

Sustainable growth needs to be based on:

- business **investment predictability** and legal certainty;
- improved governance **transparency**;
- **clear and homogenous and simplified criteria for granting licences across the EU**: the slowness and complexity of these administrative procedures do not always ensure environmental protection, indeed on the contrary sometimes making it difficult to establish socioeconomic, environmentally sustainable and quality aquaculture farms;
- **common disease management procedures** and access to appropriate veterinary treatments that are not harmful to animal and human health;
- **effective spatial planning**, taking into account all sectors, sustainability issues and food security, and further involving aquaculture organisations and local fisheries action groups (FLAGs) in decision-making through regionalisation;
- the availability of guidance documents, exchanges of best practices, the support of the Aquaculture Advisory Council;
- adequate **financial support**.

EU legislation should be better adapted to aquaculture's realities, specificities and needs in the framework of the common fisheries policy and in coherence, *inter alia*, with EU environmental legislation. Environmental sustainability should go hand in hand with social and economic sustainability.

Enhancing the competitiveness of EU aquaculture within and outside EU borders: regretting the lack of a level playing field and the dangerous distortions of competition in the sector, Members called for imported aquaculture products to be subject to the same environmental, food safety, socio-labour standards and respect for human rights as EU operators. They insisted that measures be taken to encourage EU investment in aquaculture projects in third countries.

The report also suggested:

- fully implementing EU legislation on **labelling and consumer information**, both in the fish markets and in the hotel, restaurant and catering sector;
- creating a **specific label** for the recognition of products from EU sustainable aquaculture;
- ensuring the **availability of veterinary products** by creating a genuine EU common market for vaccines and other veterinary products that protect animal and human health, especially for 'minor' species. Members welcomed the Commission's action plan to present incentives to increase the uptake of diagnostics, antimicrobial alternatives and vaccines;
- improving **promotion campaigns** and communication at EU level on the benefits of aquaculture and fish consumption;
- continuing to support aquaculture **research** activities through the Ninth Framework Programme;
- ensuring appropriate **vocational training** in aquaculture: the retraining of professional fishermen in alternative methods of managing aquatic environments would contribute to the creation of secure jobs for women and young people in rural, coastal and outermost areas, on islands, and generally in areas which are highly dependent on fishing and aquaculture activities.

Adequate funding: Members called on the EU, as part of its post-2020 common fisheries policy, to increase investment in freshwater aquaculture to **75%** to boost the desire to invest in and support fish farmers. They also asked the Commission to draw up, together with the European Investment Bank, an EU-level interest-rate support scheme for investing in aquaculture and financing liquid assets.

Members proposed to increase, in the future, **EU support for aquaculture-related research, development and innovation**, with particular regard to areas affecting economic sustainability and international competitiveness.

The Commission is invited to make further efforts and provide the necessary additional assistance necessary to enable users of the European Maritime Fisheries Fund (EMFF) to gain access to funding.