More fish in the seas? Measures to promote stock recovery above the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), including fish recovery areas and marine protected areas

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The Committee on Fisheries adopted the own-initiative report by Caroline ROOSE (Greens/EFA, BE) on more fish in the seas? Measures to promote stock recovery above the maximum sustainable yield (MSY), including fish recovery areas and marine protected areas.

By 2020, the marine environment was supposed to have achieved good environmental status and the exploitation of all fish stocks was supposed to be at a sustainable level. Although progress is being made, the targets set in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and the CFP have not been met.

Improving fisheries management to end overfishing

Members reiterated their call for full implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy with the aim of restoring and maintaining populations of fish stocks above biomass levels capable of producing MSY.

They called on the Commission and the Member States to:

- strengthen scientific coverage with the objective that 100 % of the fish stocks exploited in European waters be assessed at the latest by 2025 and that the MSY can be calculated for all these stocks, where scientifically possible;

- take the necessary steps in order to improve data collection on recreational fisheries, considering their environmental impact and socio-economic value.

For its part, the Commission should:

- support plans to improve selectivity and establish which practices are harmful to stocks, ocean biodiversity and marine environments and to introduce measures to limit and change them;

- support plans to improve selectivity and survival of non-target species, and to take into account the results of studies showing the detrimental impacts of fishing techniques such as bottom-contacting gear or fish aggregating devices (FADs) by strongly limiting their use;

- study the relevance of using indicators other than MSY in fisheries management that would take into account species interactions and socioeconomic factors as well as the effects of climate change and pollution;

- ensure that Member States adopt data collection programmes that cover the impact of fishing activities on the wider environment, including on the bycatch of sensitive species, and on the seabed.

Rebuild and restore

Overall, Members considered that the EU, following the evaluation of the CFP by 2022, should, where necessary, adapt current fisheries management practices and accelerate the transition towards low-impact fisheries, in order not only to preserve fish stocks at current levels but also, more importantly, to rebuild fish stocks and restore marine ecosystems.

The report underlined the importance of small-scale coastal fishing and believes that this sector can significantly facilitate transition to sustainable fish stock management.

Expanding the network of protected areas and improving its management

Although the EU has made progress and met the target of designating 10 % of Europe's waters as protected areas, the network of marine protected areas (MPAs) is far from being fully effective. When successful, marine protected areas offer large socio-economic benefits, especially for coastal communities and the fisheries and tourism sector, and that MPAs can perform key ecological functions for the reproduction of fish stocks (providing spawning grounds and nurseries) and improve their resilience.

Member States are urged to set strong and effective management plans for the existing and future MPAs and to put in place stronger control, monitoring and surveillance measures to ensure that MPAs are respected.

The importance of having a comprehensive and coherent approach when establishing MPAs, by not only limiting commercial fishing activities but also tackling other activities such as fossil fuel exploration and exploitation, mining, large-scale aquaculture, dredging, offshore wind farms, transport, and recreational fisheries and other leisure activities.

Member States are invited to expand the network of fish stock recovery areas under the CFP, especially where there is clear evidence of heavy concentrations of fish below minimum conservation reference size or of spawning grounds.

Tackling other environmental factors threatening fish stock recovery

In this regard, the report stressed that rapid and strong action to fight climate change is essential for the preservation of healthy marine organism populations and habitats, and therefore for the continuity of sustainable fishing activity and for food security in the long term.

Stressing the need to involve fishermen in the fight against pollution of the seas and oceans, Members called on the Commission to urge Member States to adopt legislation authorising fishermen to bring to land any waste caught at sea.