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 European Parliament adopted by 362 votes to 248, with 71 abstentions, a resolution 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.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is not yet fully implemented and some of its measures such as the establishment of fish stock recovery areas have not been used. According to STECF, some 38% of stocks in the North-East Atlantic and 92% of those under scientific assessment in the Mediterranean and Black Sea are overfished despite the legal requirement to stop overfishing by 2020.

Improving fisheries management to end overfishing

Parliament reiterated its 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. It 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:

- present its proposals for Total Allowable Catches (TACs) as provided for in the CFP Regulation;

- strengthen the implementation of the ecosystem approach to fisheries management, including by increasingly applying multi-species approaches, in order to minimise the negative impacts of fishing activities and other factors such as climate change on marine ecosystems, fish populations and society and to ensure ocean resilience to climate change;

- 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.

Transition to low-impact fishing

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 resolution underlined the importance of small-scale coastal fishing and believes that this sector can significantly facilitate transition to sustainable fish stock management. Artisanal fisheries should receive special attention and support.

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, as only a very small share of the existing MPAs have management plans and protection measures.

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 Commission is urged to set strong science-based MPA management guidelines for Member States and to establish a classification of MPAs taking into account their stage of establishment, management plans and ecosystemic benefits. It should accompany fisheries agreements with third countries with management and governance measures such as protected marine areas.

The resolution insisted on 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 resolution 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.