The impact on the fishing sector of offshore windfarms and other renewable energy systems

2019/2158(INI) - 01/06/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Fisheries adopted an own-initiative report by Peter VAN DALEN (EPP, NL) on the impact on the fishing sector of offshore wind farms and other renewable energy systems.

Long-term vision

Offshore wind turbines have an average life cycle of 25 to 30 years. Very few turbines have so far been decommissioned and recycling is still very complex with 85 to 90 % of a dismantled wind turbine being recycled. The report stressed that a long-term vision based on a circular economy and life-cycle approach is necessary in order to assess the impacts on other activities, such as fishing, and on local communities and ecosystems, at the end of the project.

The report highlighted the need to avoid the potential negative long-term impact caused by offshore wind turbines on certain ecosystems, fish stocks and biodiversity, and consequently on fisheries as a whole. It emphasised the need for a life-cycle approach to their development, from construction through operation and decommissioning, hence the importance of rigorous and detailed studies to assess the impacts of existing offshore wind turbines.

The report warned that offshore renewable energy will only be sustainable if it has no negative impact on the environment and on economic, social and territorial cohesion, especially in fisheries-dependent regions.

While stressing that renewable energy and energy efficiency are among the key drivers for reaching a net zero-emissions economy, Members highlighted that in order to meet the 2030 renewable energy target, offshore renewable electricity infrastructure capacity and production need to be increased accordingly.

The report also highlighted the important potential of renewable hydrogen, including from wind and solar energy, in reaching the Union’s climate neutrality objective.

Spatial planning

Parliament called on Member States, in line with maritime spatial planning provisions, to designate specific historical and traditional fishing grounds of local fishers as areas that are to remain free of offshore renewables. The Commission and the Member States are urged to improve cross-border cooperation in maritime spatial planning, including with the United Kingdom, the largest producer of offshore wind in Europe, in order to find solutions to common problems, integrate electricity connections and learn from best practices.

Floating offshore wind devices

Members acknowledged the potential of floating offshore wind devices which create opportunities for installations in areas with deep waters, and involve greater distance from the coastline, less visual impact and less potential spatial overlap with fishing areas.

Decommissioning of offshore wind turbines

Members expressed concern about the lack of research into the decommissioning of offshore wind turbines and into the effects of decommissioning on the environment. They stressed that the decommissioning of offshore wind turbines must neither generate enduring environmental impacts or pose safety risks to fishing vessels due to any remaining sub-seabed infrastructure. Members also stressed that offshore windfarms should only be built if an integrated approach to the life-cycle processes of offshore wind turbines is taken. They urged the creation of an international standard that defines how to decommission turbines.

Furthermore, Member States are urged to:

- take into account the need to ensure that the negative effects of offshore wind turbines on fisheries are avoided and that they are therefore placed away from fishing grounds;

- take account of the impact of offshore renewable energy on the marine ecosystem and fisheries when determining their energy mix;

- continue working on the development and usage of other forms of renewable energy.

The Commission is called on to:

- assess initiatives that stimulate local economies and economic activities offshore and to find synergies between sectors that can serve as a basis for a future-proof economic recovery

- carry out further research in addition to studying the environmental impacts in order to assess the possible economic and social impacts on fisheries of investments in offshore renewables and to identify appropriate ways to overcome these negative impacts.