Rebuilding fish stocks in the Mediterranean Sea: assessment and next steps

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The Committee on Fisheries adopted an own-initiative report by Raffaele STANCANELLI (ECR, IT) on rebuilding fish stocks in the Mediterranean: assessment and next steps.

The Mediterranean is one of the areas with the greatest biodiversity in the world in addition to being a basin that is home to coastal communities that depend largely on fishing, and particularly small-scale fishing.

According to the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) 2020 report on the state of fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, the proportion of overexploited fish stocks in the Mediterranean has decreased from 88% in 2014 to 75% in 2018, which clearly shows that much remains to be done to preserve biodiversity but also to ensure the survival of the fishing sector.

Improving legislative aspects

The report called on the Commission to identify obstacles to the process of rebuilding fish stocks, including the consideration of **legislative and non-legislative measures**. It stressed the need to strengthen existing **marine protected areas** (MPAs) by involving fishers in the preparation and management phase.

The Commission is invited to:

- ensure a **level playing field** for all economic sectors in the implementation of effectively managed and connected marine protected areas (MPAs);

- respond to the needs of Mediterranean countries by providing scientific and technical support to enable them to use regional and international funding mechanisms and to develop sustainable development projects;

- assess the opportunity to define **new stock management plans** in order to respect the principles of social, economic and environmental sustainability defined in the CFP;

- increase efforts to **improve data collection** to better design the necessary management measures, given the high number of stocks whose status is unknown.

Members called on the EU and Member States to expand the network of fish stock recovery areas under the CFP and under the GFCM, especially where there is clear evidence of heavy concentrations of fish below minimum conservation reference size or of spawning grounds.

Future legislative measures should be implemented gradually and in proportion to the sector’s capacity for action. They should not entail an excessive bureaucratic and financial burden and should adopt a **holistic approach** to the problem and jointly address all the threats to stock depletion.

Any measures adopted should include:

- an analysis of environmental and socio-economic data relating to local communities and the fisheries sector in the Mediterranean to assess the impact of the COVID 19 crisis on the fisheries sector and on fish stocks;

- an analysis of the social, economic and environmental impact, as well as the impact on fish stocks, of the recreational fishing sector.

The Commission is also invited to publish a study on the impact of the diverse human activities and sources of pollution, both terrestrial and marine, on fish stocks and on marine ecosystems.

Strengthening the role of operators in decision-making and data collection

The report called for greater involvement of regional and local authorities, research institutes and local stakeholders in the collection of data on selective fishing, in close collaboration with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). Recognising the role of fishermen as 'guardians of the sea', Members recommended promoting the exchange of best practices and innovation to improve the selectivity of fishing gear and the collection of marine waste.

Member States are called upon to allow the development of local fisheries **co-management models** based on participation, consultation and joint decision-making between among stakeholders.

Upholding the rule of law

Members noted that the political instability and unrest in Libya are posing a tangible threat to EU fishers active in the southern Mediterranean, jeopardising their personal freedom and the safety of fishing operations. While EU fishers are required to comply with rules for the conservation of fish stocks, those from other Mediterranean countries are not required to comply with the same rules.

Members condemned the ongoing violations of the law of the sea in the Mediterranean against EU fishers for carrying out their work, in clear violation of international human rights obligations. The Commission is called on to encourage **joint efforts with neighbouring countries** to facilitate compliance with agreements concluded by regional fisheries management organisations and participation in the good management and recovery of fish stocks.