Striving for a sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture: the way forward

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The Committee on Fisheries adopted an own-initiative report by Clara AGUILERA (S&D, ES) on striving for a sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture: the way forward.

According to the report, the growth potential of the EU aquaculture sector needs to be developed in a sustainable manner, taking all three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental – into consideration. There is a need to have an attractive and market-oriented sector, also for new fish farmers, with a legal framework for attracting business investments, creating and maintaining good working conditions, and protecting the environment by using sustainable feed sources and improving aquatic health, animal welfare and biosecurity, as well as reducing the use of antimicrobials in accordance with the best available scientific advice, encouraging responsible and prudent practices, in line with the farm to fork strategy.

Aquaculture's contribution to the European Green Deal

The common fisheries policy states that aquaculture should contribute to the preservation of food production potential on a sustainable basis throughout the EU to guarantee long-term food security, including food supplies, growth and employment for EU citizens, and contribute to meeting the growing world demand for aquatic food.

While welcoming the Commission communication on the strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030 and on its contribution to the European Green Deal, Members stressed the potential of the aquaculture sector's contributions to achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal and the need to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience of the sector, notably in the light of the COVID-19 crisis.

The report also underlined that EU aquaculture meets high standards in terms of product quality and animal health, but that there is still **margin for improvement in terms of diversification, competitiveness and environmental performance**. It noted that low-impact aquaculture (such as low-trophic, multitrophic and organic aquaculture), and environmental services from aquaculture can, if further developed, greatly contribute to the European Green Deal, to the farm-to-fork strategy and to a sustainable blue economy.

EU Aquaculture Assistance mechanism

The committee expressed support for the establishment of the new EU aquaculture assistance mechanism as an innovative tool to aid the Commission, Member States, regional authorities, industry and other stakeholders to develop further guidance and consolidate best practices on different relevant areas. Members considered that all relevant stakeholders, including Parliament, should be involved in the creation of this mechanism, in particular all members of the Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC).

EU-wide communication campaigns

The report also stressed that another key element for the success of the aquaculture sector expansion is the organisation of EU-wide communication campaigns about the EU aquaculture sector and production with funds under direct management, in addition to other information and communication campaigns included

in all operational programmes in line with the strategic guidelines objectives, on specific sectors from the EU aquaculture sector.

Funding

The Commission and the Member States are called on to provide a robust, reliable, predictable, streamlined and business-friendly **legal framework**, and making full use of the available financing resources of the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF). Member States are urged to earmark sufficient funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility to support the innovation, sustainability and resilience of the EU aquaculture sector.

Main obstacles to aquaculture in the Union and possible solutions

The committee urged the Commission and the Member States to ensure that national plans for the sustainable development of aquaculture take into account the main barriers to the development of the potential of the sector and to recognise the need to allocate space to aquaculture through appropriate **spatial planning**. It highlighted the importance of a transparent and participative mechanism for allocating space, including to existing and new fishing grounds and aquaculture farms and marine protected areas as well as fisheries restricted areas to all stakeholders in an equitable manner. It regretted that some Member States have yet to present to the Commission their national maritime spatial plans, despite the deadline laid down in the directive and urged them to present their plans as soon as possible.

The development of aquaculture requires a solid, reliable, clear and administratively **simple legal framework** for the use of space and licences that provides confidence and security for investment in the sector. Spatial planning should result in an effective and flexible plan that considers the ever-changing marine and freshwater environments within which aquaculture functions, and that overly restrictive zoning may deter investment and development.

Research and innovation

The report stated that research and innovation are an important pillar to provide knowledge-based solutions to the main obstacles the sector is facing. The main areas to be focused on include alternative sources of nutrients, treatments, breeding and animal welfare in aquaculture. It is also necessary to promote investments in adapted polyculture and multi-trophic aquaculture systems and the promotion of hatcheries and nurseries activities for organic juveniles. In this sense, the **Open Method of Coordination for the exchange of best practices** and innovation on organic aquaculture the Commission proposes could be the platform where solutions could be found.

Organic aquaculture

Lastly, Members welcomed the Commission communication on an action plan for the development of organic production and pointed out that organic aquaculture needs to play a key role in the planned growth of the aquaculture sector, given its ample untapped potential for development, in line with the transition to a sustainable food system in Europe, and which should be given assistance through the EMFAF.