EU Action Plan: protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries

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The European Parliament adopted by 402 votes to 95, with 57 abstentions, a resolution on the EU Action Plan: protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries.

The resolution stated that there is an urgent need to step up action at global and EU level to reverse the real, existing and scientifically described declines of marine ecosystems. Currently, there are numerous legislative texts, communications, strategies and regulations related to the protection of the environment and fisheries management, in particular on the restoration of nature.

Protection of the environment and sustainability

Parliament praised the efforts made by the EU fisheries sector and the progress achieved in making fisheries even more sustainable and contributing to the protection and sustainable use of marine ecosystems. It considered that, despite these efforts and progress, the ocean is affected by several other factors such as overfishing, climate change, acidification, invasive alien species and different sources of pollution, in particular from land-based activities and transport, which are to some extent beyond the control of fishers and pose significant threats to fishers' livelihoods and marine ecosystems.

Consistent approach with existing regulations

Parliament considered that the Commission's action plan lacks a coherent approach with other priorities and strategies, such as ensuring food security and the strategic autonomy of the EU. It stated that the action plan should be managed through an **integrated, consistent and ecosystem-based approach** that promotes **synergies** between all maritime activities in order to avoid conflicts and foster cooperation, in particular as regards marine energy infrastructure, and that it should ensure a level playing field with non-EU countries.

The resolution recalled that the action plan should be consistent with the objectives of the CFP to ensure that fishing and aquaculture activities are environmentally sustainable in the long term and are managed in line with an ecosystem-based approach. It should also be consistent with the objectives of ensuring economic, social and employment benefits, as well as contribute to the availability of food supplies and make the best use of available fishing opportunities to reduce dependency on non-EU markets.

Restoring marine ecosystems

Parliament regretted the lack of coherence in the title of the action plan, as well as the lack of a holistic set of proposals in the action plan, as the plan mainly focuses on altering the fishing practices that affect species and habitats and does not address the potential for alignment between fishing techniques and practices and the protection or restoration of ecosystems.

On the other hand, the resolution welcomed the fact that the action plan addresses the potential for introducing **additional measures** to boost selectivity, including innovations to improve the selectivity of fishing gear and devices and measures to reduce catches of juveniles and the by-catch of sensitive species. It highlighted the urgent need to act to reduce the by-catch of common **dolphins and porpoises** by establishing short-term closures of certain fishing areas combined with acoustic deterrent devices and improved monitoring systems.

Furthermore, Parliament stressed, for example, that scientific studies show that **increasing mesh sizes and minimum landing sizes** would make it possible to leave the youngest fish in the water and therefore increase the chances for fish populations to reproduce, leading to **higher yields** for fishers and higher landings per unit effort.

Marine protected areas (MPAs)

The Commission's action plan presents an oversimplified and over-generalised approach, thus giving the impression that all MPAs can be implemented and managed in the same way, illustrated for example by proposals related to certain fishing gears and to the phaseout of mobile bottom fishing in all MPAs by 2030. Parliament called for a balanced approach on the definition and implementation of MPAs, taking into account the conservation objectives of each specific areas, but also activities that traditionally use those areas, as well as the dynamic and changing environment resulting from climate change, while ensuring the effective participation of fishers in their designation and management.

The Commission and the Member States are called on to implement the protective or restrictive measures needed to achieve the conservation and restoration targets specific to each of all these MPAs, including the technical measures needed to achieve the targets, and through sufficient funding, starting with the areas most at risk and the Natura 2000 areas that aim to protect marine habitats.

The resolution also called for further efforts to be made to address global activities detrimental to ocean protection, including by fleets of non-EU countries, such as the **Chinese fleet**, and for consideration to be given to establishing a global network of MPAs.

Parliament expressed deep concern regarding the impact of oil and gas extraction on the marine environment, as well as on fisheries and aquaculture and it reiterated its call to prohibit all environmentally damaging extractive industrial activities, such as **mining and fossil fuel extraction**, in MPAs.

Bottom contacting fishing gears

Many Union vessels operate with mobile bottom contacting fishing gears, and many coastal regions are socially and economically dependent on activities using mobile and fixed bottom contacting gears, such as shellfish farming activities. Parliament highlighted that restrictions on or the closing of fishing zones to bottom contacting fishing gears are not simply a matter of moving the activity of fishing vessels to different fishing grounds. It welcomed the fact that the Commission has acknowledged that a **blanket approach banning mobile bottom contacting fishing is not suitable** to achieve the objectives of the action plan.

Member States' reactions to the action plan

Parliament noted the numerous declarations and clear statements by representatives of the Member States raising clear concerns with the action plan and its associated uncertainties. It noted that the Member States have especially questioned the **overly simplistic approach** taken by the Commission in relation to bottom trawling restrictions in marine protected areas.

Legal implications of the Commission's action plan

Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to exercise its prerogatives and competences regarding any initiative, such as legislative proposals and delegated or implementing acts, including those linked or unlinked to the action plan.

The resolution noted that although the action plan is not legally binding, its implementation will entail significant socioeconomic costs for the Member States and their fleets, as it contains around 90 measures in the form of regulations, guidance, analyses, roadmaps, studies, reports and initiatives. Member States and the Commission are called on to conduct the necessary studies in due time as part of the preparation for any new or reformed regulations or initiatives, as well as to take into account and engage with the marine spatial planning processes, between regions and sea basins, but also among different Member States and with non-EU countries to ensure socioeconomic benefits.

Lastly, Parliament believes that measures included in the action plan should follow, where possible, the **ordinary legislative procedure** to ensure greater transparency and should include a genuine impact assessment, with the proper involvement of all stakeholders.