The way forward for European aquaculture

Tuesday 24 May 2016, Venue: Square Brussels meeting center, 9.00-10.00

1. Commissioner Vella, General Director Hoogeveen, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me here today in my capacity as Vice chair of the European Parliament Fisheries committee. It is indeed a very important sector we are here to discuss today, which with the demographic development the world is facing - and with depleting fish stocks - will play an increasingly more important role when it comes to feeding the planet.

2. The billion-dollar question is of course if this can be done in a sustainable way? There is a lot to say but given the limited time I will try to stick to some key points regarding the architecture - the sustainable building blocks we need.

3. It is true that Europe has a very small aquaculture production compared to the global output (1,5 %), especially compared to Asian production (88 %). However it is important to look beyond the figures and not only concentrate on volumes. We know that extensive aquaculture has created huge environmental problems with destroyed coastlines and poor quality products as a result. In addition, sanitary and social conditions are in far too many cases not respected.

4. In 2013, to support the national planning of member states, the Commission issued “Strategic guidelines for the Sustainable Development of EU Aquaculture”. However, rather than consolidating a vision of sustainable development underpinned by clearly defined principles, the EU guidelines focus on: “actions to remove administrative barriers, coordinated spatial planning, enhancing competitiveness and promoting a level playing field for EU operators by exploiting their competitive advantages”. This is all very well and they are important building blocks for advancing an industry, but they do little to ensure the sustainability of the industry.

5. From my point of view there are four building blocks that are necessary, if we truly want to ensure a sustainable future for European aquaculture.

6. **First**, to start with, we need facts, data and knowledge. And Commissioner Vella has indeed brought some good news to us today about the launch of the website "EU Aquaculture Online" - where information of European Aquaculture will be available on-line. I hope it will prove to be a useful tool for sharing best sustainable practice and new techniques, with a view to improve the industry's environmental footprint. I am in particular curious about the level of transparency, for instance, when it comes to sharing data on the amounts of chemicals and antibiotics which are being used and released into the surrounding environment.

7. **Second,** we also need a common definition of what constitutes European sustainable aquaculture, providing clear criteria based on data and policy relevant performance indicators.

8. It must be said, that in the last few years, the industry has put a lot of effort into regulating good practice, particularly when it comes to reducing escapes. There are several interesting projects and research on new techniques, new feed, better labeling that will contribute to develop a sustainable aquaculture. **But, these voluntary measures will not be enough to ensure sustainable** European aquaculture.

9. **Therefore, we need the third building block** and that is to streamline governance at EU, regional and Member State level. Aquaculture policies and national multiannual plans must be integrated with existing EU and national legislation. For instance:

- the preservation of **good environmental status** (targets and objectives) as defined by the **Marine Strategy Framework Directive** and the **Water Frame Work Directive.**

- **The precautionary principle** which is at the core of the EU treaty

- **Marine spatial planning**, **Integrated Coastal Zone Management** and **Birds and Habitats Directive** which should guide the identifications of

areas where aquaculture can take place with minimal environmental impact **– based on the ecosystem approach.**

This is the only way to guarantee a long-term viable and sustainable aquaculture sector.

10. There are also other important dimensions and tools that can and should be used to promote and support the development of sustainable European aquaculture. It is my firm belief that the only way forward for European aquaculture is to invest in quality. In particular from a consumer perspective.

    Our higher environmental and social standards shouldn't be undercut by cheap imports. This concern has been raised several times by the European Parliament. Not least in an initiative report by our committee chair Mr. Cadec, where the Parliament stresses that it should be one of the key aims of EU policy to ensure that imported products meet the same requirements that apply to EU production, in every respect.

11. Another great concern which I must take time to address relating to quality and environmental impact, is of course the need for feed. A growing European Aquaculture sector will put pressure on the stocks of wild fish for feed production. It is therefor crucial that we progress with research to develop alternatives for non-fished ingredients in feed. And as pointed out in the Parliament resolution on aquaculture: European aquaculture should give priority to herbivorous species and carnivorous species, which can thrive on reduced consumption of fishmeal and oils. **In short, it should be a key principle for European aquaculture** that **all aquaculture facilities are net producers of fish protein.**

12. **These concerns, feed, along with social and quality aspects of imports, could possibly be addressed by a <u>fourth building block, consumer power: by supporting eco-labeling standards</u>** <u>for fishery and aquaculture products,</u> as discussed by the report the Commission published a couple of days ago (Options for an EU eco-labeling scheme for fishery and aquaculture products, COM (2016) 263 final).

13. Finally I have a request, to Commissioner Vella, which concerns the fact that Aquaculture often is mentioned as a way to reduce the pressure on wild fish by providing an alternative source of seafood. Even if there are some very good examples - *for instance regarding aquaculture of sturgeon, which has replaced the capture of wild sturgeons* - to my knowledge, no comprehensive study has been made to verify that aquaculture of big commercialized species such as Atlantic salmon and Sea bass really reduce the pressure on the wild fish. More specifically, does aquaculture reduce pressure of other fisheries; on same species, similar species or in general? So, I turn to Commissioner Vella and ask if you could consider commissioning such a study. I believe such a study would be interesting, since it would provide us with valuable information when it comes to choosing the path forward for European aquaculture.

14. I would like to end with a quote on fishing by the famous author John Steinbeck: ”It has always been my private conviction that any man who pits his intelligence against a fish and loses has it coming”.

15. Of course our situation is a bit different, but if we don’t pit our intelligence and knowledge with respect to nature when it comes to aquaculture, in the end, we risk not only losing the fish, but also so much more – the sustainability of our seas. So let us tread carefully and think well before we act.