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The environmental angle of the Common Fisheries Policy reform

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

ENVI Committee of the European Parliament

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Dear President Leinen, Honourable Members,

I am really pleased that you have invited me here today to discuss with you the reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. There is no getting away from the fact that the issues you are dealing with are linked to fisheries. To put it another way, the success of our respective policies calls for close cooperation between fisheries and environment departments. This is the only way we can achieve the common goals of both policies.

I have made no secret of my wish to see environmental factors at the heart of our reform. We really need an ecosystem approach to fisheries management, we need a truly use of the Integrated Maritime Policy and its environmental pillar, namely the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

My intention is to form a future policy that contributes to the objectives of the Marine Strategy. This means our new policy must achieve and maintain Good Environmental Status of the marine environment. For our policy this means ensuring that fishing is carried out in such a way that fish stocks, but also mammals and seabirds can reproduce and grow. So fish must be fished at sustainable levels, causing as little by-catch of juveniles and other marine animals as possible. Fishing must not interfere with the objectives of preserving biodiversity, including our Natura 2000 obligations. We need also the reduction, even the elimination of discards, because we cannot afford it.

The CFP as it stands is falling short of all this. We made this clear in our Green Paper and a broad range of stakeholders agreed with us. We have a persistent structural overcapacity in our fleet and the result is that our fish stocks are overexploited. Another problem is short termism, such as the yearly haggling in the Council meetings over more fish quotas. But don't get me wrong: The failure of this policy is not just the Council's fault. I have to admit that the "top down" approach does not give sufficient responsibility and ownership to the fishing industry. If you take these three problems of overcapacity, short-termism and the to-down approach and add to this the fact that sometimes there was also a lack of political will to ensure compliance, you have a recipe for disaster.

As I have already said on many occasions, in this House and elsewhere, the current situation simply will not do. . We need a root-and-branch reform of the CFP. Beyond this, we can and must once and for all ditch the old belief that environmental conservation and fisheries are incompatible.

In concrete terms, this will imply enshrining the ecosystem approach more directly within the CFP. As a result, CFP will cover measures like protecting sensitive areas like spawning grounds or other sensitive habitats such as coral reefs or seagrass beds. The new policy will also better protect non-target species such as seabirds, cetaceans and sharks. And we will use maritime policy tools, such as maritime spatial planning, when designating Fisheries or Marine Protected Areas to ensure full coordination of all marine and maritime uses of the sea and its resources. We also need to better integrate such measures into long-term plans. In fact my intention is to extend long term plans to all commercially important fisheries. This optimistic tone comes with a warning however: all of these good intentions will remain nothing more than a hollow shell if our mindsets do not change. We have to avoid micro-management at political level. We need a set-up that focuses on outcomes and setting targets, while offering a choice of instruments for implementation to the Member States. We need a system in which the fishing industry and other stakeholders are properly involved and assume the necessary responsibility. Only then can we hope for real improvement in terms of compliance.

This is why I repeat that I want a greener, simpler and more decentralised CFP. This means we have to set out our priorities firmly when we fix the basic objectives and

targets. Confusing or conflicting objectives will only lead back to short-term approaches. For me personally the policy's social dimension is at least as important as the others; but it must also be clear to anybody that without healthy fish stocks and thriving ecosystems, any social trend in fisheries will not exist. Sustainability is the only way to have thriving fishing communities and it is the best insurance policy for fishermen and their families.

This brings me to the issue of small-scale fisheries. These fisheries often contribute to a vital extent to the social fabric and economic well-being of our coastal communities. Small scale vessels often carry out fishing activities that are less harmful to the environment and often more selective than other parts of the fleet. For me it is therefore absolutely important to ensure that these coastal fleets do not lose out in the reform.

Before I conclude, let me just stress one thing. The CFP is not only about a relatively small catching sector. It also covers a common market of fisheries products, of which more than 50% comes from imports. It is therefore our duty and my declared goal to promote sustainable fishing also beyond EU waters, via the multilateral framework, regional fisheries management organisations and bilateral agreements. I will ensure that this external dimension is a clear part of the reform agenda. In addition, as you might know, I intend to propose a fundamental overhaul of the common market organisation, to bring it in line with the basic objectives and principles of the reformed CFP. We need to give consumers the assurances that the fish they buy is from healthy and sustainable sources.

I have reserved one very important point for the end of my intervention: this is co-decision. This reform will be the first one in the history of the European Union that will be decided by you and the Council together. By inviting me here today you have already demonstrated your active participation in the CFP reform process. I want to be frank with you: I will need your help when we get to the discussion and negotiation process to bring about a true reform. There are too many voices that think a reform can be done by turning a few screws here and there and then we are done. I am convinced that this will not be enough. This is why I will need your close involvement in the challenge of reforming our policy. The ideas we exchange today will feed into the ongoing discussions on the way forward for our reform. I warmly invite you to continue your active participation in the CFP reform process, and I look forward to furthering my cooperation with you over the coming months and years.

Thank you.