

Maria Damanaki

European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

Closing the door to illegal fishing

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

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Mr Chairman, Honourable Members, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for devoting your attention to illegal fishing today. I'd like to focus on three main issues.

- Firstly, I'd like to give some specific examples of the costs of IUU fishing for society.
- Secondly I will explain how we make sure that EU funding does not directly or indirectly contribute to illegal fishing, both with the tools available now and with the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy.
- And thirdly I would like to address the global dimension of IUU fishing and see how the Commission aspires to tackle IUU fishing at a global level.

So first, let us consider the direct and indirect economic costs of IUU fishing.

As you know, the Commission is deeply involved in the fight against IUU fishing. Why? Well, as I have often said, illegal fishing is a crime – a crime which, by undermining the sustainability of fish stocks and marine ecosystems, causes general disruption to marine life.

As stock levels keep declining, this crime ends up affecting the whole sector: in the first place law-abiding fishermen, but, in the long run, even those who currently profit from illegal activities.

Illegal fishing has been and still is one of the major threats to fish stocks, undermining the very foundation of any fisheries policy.

Calculating the economic impact of illegal fishing is difficult. Research done prior to 2010 suggests that IUU fishing was the second largest producer of fishery products in the world, worth approximately 10 billion Euros. This is an absolutely astonishing figure, making up almost 19% of worldwide catches.

Sadly, we have ourselves supported illegal fishing in the past: it has been estimated that 16% of EU imports – over 1 billion euro - came from illegal fisheries every year.

As a key player in world fisheries, the EU has now taken an active role against IUU fishing: at international level, by actively proposing and supporting measures to improve controls and identify offenders; and within the EU, by adopting the so-called IUU Regulation.

This regulation marks our commitment to fight illegal fishing and we take its proper implementation and functioning very seriously.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Proper implementation also means this: we must see to it that no EU subsidies go to EU operators who fish against the rules. We cannot grant public aid for something and then turn the other way if that same beneficiary goes against the rules somewhere else, with another vessel, or under another flag: that would make no sense.

The EU legislation adopted over the last few years already provides for clear responsibilities and obligations in this respect. Under the European Fisheries Fund rules, Member States are responsible for selecting projects and beneficiaries and for performing checks and audits on the projects themselves or on their financials. With that information, it is up to Member States to make sure that no aid is granted to unlawful operators.

On top of that, the IUU Regulation now forbids Member States to grant any public money, whether from national or EU sources, to operators whose vessels are listed on our "black list". The EU "black list" currently contains vessels listed as IUU by

regional fisheries management organisations; but it can - and will - also include other vessels, flagged both EU and non-EU countries; and I promise you that EU vessels will not receive any favourable treatment.

A good example is this recent case: the French authorities have denied aid to a French owner to scrap a purse seiner. Why? Because the seiner's owner also owned another vessel - this one appearing on the black list of the ICCAT organisation!

On my request, Member States are ascertaining as we speak if any vessels flagged to third countries but owned by EU nationals are engaged in illegal activities. If so, they will have to sanction them, suspend any aid and put the vessels in question on the black list. Products from these vessels won't be landed onto EU territory anymore. Member States will report to the Commission on the outcome of all these investigations.

Finally, we have yet another instrument, the Control Regulation, which also enables the Commission to withdraw or suspend aid to Member States which fall short of their responsibilities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You will agree with me that this is a very good start, but we can do even more. We could send an even clearer message that only those fishermen who fully comply with the rules can receive financial assistance from the EU.

One way to do that is introducing more stringent criteria for the selection of projects: these criteria should make sure that beneficiaries comply with all the rules of the common fisheries policy and that dishonest operators are excluded from EU funding. The link between IUU regulation and financial assistance would then be made upstream - already before the aid is allocated.

How can we do this?

Well, the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy is a perfect opportunity to do this: no EU funding should help or contribute to, directly or indirectly, IUU fishing. EU assistance should be governed by a single financial instrument and should be subject to a strong conditionality clause.

This requires additional eligibility and selection criteria for both projects and potential beneficiaries. To have their project selected for funding, for instance, vessel owners could be required to prove that none of their vessels are listed on our IUU vessel list. In addition, to be eligible beneficiaries would have to meet all obligations of the IUU Regulation for the whole period of project implementation. If not, payments would be suspended or withdrawn. Such conditionality will ensure that operators engaged in IUU fishing never benefit from EU funding.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The results of the IUU Regulation are already there.

Ninety of our trading partners are using the catch certification scheme.

EU Member States work with each other and with the Commission to control incoming trade and check that those declarations are indeed true.

Considering that this regulation entered into force just over a year ago, we expect its impact to grow even further in the coming years.

We are confident that closing one of the biggest markets in the world to IUU produce must damage illegal operators somehow - and that hopefully we are making a difference at global level.

However, we know that dishonest fishermen will continue to operate as long as they can and as long as it is profitable.

Illegal fishing is a global problem, affecting virtually all countries on all continents.

Putting an end to IUU fishing worldwide is therefore no easy task and it can only be done through an international effort.

I have an idea of what the next step should be - and I am determined to pursue it through the adequate regional fisheries organisations: in my opinion, we should adopt a worldwide catch certification system.

A global catch certification regime would be extremely effective. It will improve the control of fishing activities carried out in any waters, and of the produce marketed in all countries in the world. I believe such a worldwide programme would bring about a fair trade in fisheries products; it would foster an international commitment to combat this crime and would ultimately bring us closer to responsible fishing and sustainable world fisheries.

Thank you.