



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels
MARE.D.3/KP

**Subject: MEDAC Advice 32/2023 of 8 March 2023 on the EU Action Plan
“Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries”**

Dear Mr Marzoa Notlevsen,

I would like to thank the Mediterranean Advisory Council for the advice 32/2023 of 8 March 2023 in relation to the EU Action Plan “Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries”.

Let me begin by frankly assuring you, that contrary to many rumours, the European Commission does not plan to introduce a blanket ban on bottom fishing in marine protected areas in March 2024. We very much appreciate the contribution that Mediterranean fishers have made in recent years to make fishing more sustainable. We sincerely commend the efforts you have undertaken to ensure that fish stocks recover.

We want to discuss with you, the fishers and the coastal communities, how we can further facilitate a transition to less harmful fishing gear. The fact is, 79% of the seabed off the European Union’s coast is currently considered to be physically disturbed¹. We are united in the goal of protecting marine biodiversity to maintain long-term future prospects for fisheries, especially for the next generation of fishers. For this reason, since 2008, all EU members are required to increase their efforts to protect the seabed.

Dialogue with you and the other relevant stakeholders is important to the Commission. We are just as dependent on your on-the-ground assessment, as we are on the active cooperation of the Member States. More is possible here. We are also always open to new scientific studies and ideas. The more environmentally friendly the fishing methods, the better we can reconcile the conservation of species with economically sustainable fisheries. Moreover, this benefits the climate, as an intact seabed serves as an important carbon store.

¹ Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive

Mr Antonio Marzoa Notlevsen
MEDAC
presidente@med-ac.eu
c/o Ministero delle Politiche Agricole, Alimentari, Forestali e del Turismo
Via XX Settembre, 20
00187 Roma
ITALY

At the same time, it is evident that the fishers alone cannot solve this issue. Many other factors affect the state of our seas, for example maritime transport, energy production, tourism, agriculture and industry, and we have already implemented various measures to reduce these pressures on marine ecosystems and enhance the sustainability of fish stocks. We are realising from many areas, the dangers that come when we become too dependent on other regions of the world. We want to prevent a further increase in dependency, alongside you.

In this regard, I consider our Action Plan to be an invitation to open up this important discussion. DG MARE, together with DG ENV, had the opportunity few weeks ago to have extensive discussions with the MEDAC on the EU Action Plan. As indicated on this occasion, with this action plan we want to increase the dialogue together with national authorities and all fisheries stakeholders to put a roadmap in place at the level of each Member State and to find solutions, exploring alternative techniques and flexibilities, to reduce the environmental impact of our fisheries, while continuing to sustain those communities that rely on them.

I understand your concern that structural changes in the industry will be needed in order to implement closures of mobile bottom-contacting fishing in existing marine protected areas. I agree that there are many issues that need to be considered when implementing new marine protected areas and new areas closed to bottom fishing. Factors such as markets and processing impacts, working conditions, displacement and socioeconomic sustainability are all important and I fully agree that the involvement of the stakeholders in the impact assessment phase of the development of these measures is crucial to find the right solutions. To this it is important to add that the development of alternative, innovative and lower-impact fishing gears needs to be pursued and included in the deliberations as well.

Dialogue with scientists, researchers and innovators is particularly important in this context, so that the proposals of stakeholders can also be supported by scientific studies and a distinction can be made between different fishing gear and their impact on the state of the seabed.

I thank you for sending me your recommendations concerning actions that would be alternative to those in the Action Plan. I note that in many cases you recommend to align fisheries management with the conservation goals of the marine protected areas (MPAs). However, the Action Plan was designed in recognition of the fact that although MPAs have been adopted covering 12% of the EU's sea area, specific conservation measures have been clearly defined only for less than 2% of that sea area. While this is a useful start, it falls short of the measures agreed internationally at Aichi in 2010 (as well as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework of 2022) and therefore, more needs to be done.

Good consultation and open governance procedures are essential for reaching sound solutions. The Commission greatly values the work of the Advisory Councils and facilitating a dialogue between the fisheries sector and the other sectors, including in the preparation of formal advice, is a highly valuable part of that work. The creation of a new special expert group for Member States to discuss fisheries and environmental issues does not in any way detract from the work of the Advisory Councils. It is being created to improve the understanding and the synergies between the environmental and fisheries ministries of different Member States in recognition of the fact the collaboration and understanding between these sectors at this level of governance is as important as the similar collaboration and understanding is within the Advisory Councils. The MEDAC and

other Advisory Councils will of course also be welcome in direct discussions with DG ENV and DG MARE.

The coming years will be crucial, and we will only make progress together. The initiative lies with you in the regions, and we would like to support you in this work. This cooperation is very important to us, as it enables you to help shape Europe at regional level.

I thank you for your keen interest in the development of the Action Plan. The success of this initiative will depend on you, as informed stakeholders, to engage in the many difficult upcoming issues concerning decarbonisation and the improvement of marine environmental protection. I look forward to our future collaboration with a view to achieving positive benefits for the marine environment and for the fishing communities who depend on it.

Yours sincerely,

Charlina VITCHEVA

c.c.: Rosa Caggiano r.caggiano@med-ac.eu
segreteria@med-ac.eu; admin@med-ac.eu