



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,
MARE.D.3/MMM

Subject: Reply to SWWAC Advice on the Communication from the Commission “Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries”

Dear Mr Lopez,

Thank you for your very comprehensive advice on the Marine Action Plan.

After the Action Plan was adopted in February 2023, there has been multiple occasions to discuss it. One important occasion was the first meeting of the Joint Special Group of Member States of 6 October 2023 at which the SWWAC participated as observer. I am sure that most of your concerns have already been addressed during this meeting.

Nevertheless, you share with us some interesting considerations from the SWWAC that merit further reflections.

We all agree that our fishers have put enormous effort in bringing most stocks to sustainable levels, but we cannot stop there. Some of our marine ecosystems are degraded. This will compromise their function as food provider and consequently impact on the future perspectives of our sector.

I know that the situation of our ocean has not been caused by fisheries only. This is acknowledged by the Action Plan. But we all must do our part. The EU indeed acts comprehensively on human impacts affecting the marine environment, be it through the implementation of the Marine Framework Strategy Directive, the Birds and Habitats directives, the Water framework directive, or through implementing the Zero Pollution Action Plan.

The Action Plan is not a legislative proposal, and as such did not require an impact assessment because it aims at better implementing directives and regulations that were

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subject to an impact assessment. The Action Plan is a political call on Member States to step up ambition to meet their commitments made under the EU Biodiversity strategy and the global biodiversity framework by 2030. The Action Plan is the Commission's vision on how to best achieve those commitments, starting with full implementation of existing obligations under environmental and fisheries legislation.

The Action Plan deliberately leaves its implementation in the hands of the Member States, as envisaged in the CFP, as they are best suited to address the regional and local specifications, in close cooperation and consultation with all interested stakeholders.

We did not set up any **specific funding**, as there are ample financial opportunities that can be used to implement this action plan, notably by the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) and the LIFE programme.

We need to strategically use such funds in combination with other EU funding instruments, in order to maximise opportunities and channel support for the European Green transition. The cross-departmental nature of the Action Plan will also ensure that funds are shared between the relevant national authorities.

Other complementary sources of funding include:

- Horizon Europe
- the European Regional Development Fund (including Interreg)
- the European Social Fund+
- the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
- the Connecting Europe Facility
- the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

To help the Member States implement the Action Plan, and as announced at the first meeting of the Joint Special group, we will organise a dedicated workshop on how to make full use of funding opportunities. We will duly inform you nearer the date.

You also underline that some of the **deadlines proposed are very tight**, especially when it comes to the establishment of measures to protect certain **sensitive species**. These deadlines are aligned with the urgency to act, considering the robust and ample scientific information available. Measures should be taken to protect these species, as is the case for the common dolphin in the Bay of Biscay. The Action Plan also lists other species for which the results of ongoing projects will be most welcome. Here I can only encourage the commitment and involvement of our fishers to support scientific advances to come up with the best tailor-made solutions to protect the emblematic species that used to be more abundant in the European seas.

I am grateful that you underline the **necessary changes to optimise current fishing patterns, targeting commercial species**. Boosting selectivity to avoid catching juveniles is also an essential part of the Action Plan. A good example is the participation of fishers in different trials that help scientists to design innovative gears helping us in this task. As you know, my services are working jointly with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) to provide as part of its ongoing work advice on evaluating how to improve fishing gear, taking into account selectivity, the mix of targeted species, and both the long-term gains and the transitional consequences in social

and economic terms. The STECF Expert WG dealing with technical measures met in Ispra (Italy) from 22-26 January. I am pleased to see that SWWAC representatives participated in the meeting. I hope this has been an engaging experience and reinforced the basis for future work to improve the way our fishers target commercial species.

Regarding the suggestion that concerns bottom fishing, the Commissioner clearly explained that the Action Plan does not propose a blanket ban of bottom contacting fishing gears (or any other gear), but a gradual limitation of the impact of the most damaging techniques, in particular in Marine Protected Areas. Innovation is key, hence I encourage you to use all the techniques in your hand to limit this damage. In this respect, let me draw your attention to the advice released by ICES at DG MARE request on innovative gears¹.

On Marine Protected Areas, we know the measures already taken by Spain, France and Portugal.

Last, but not least, I would like to reassure you that the ACs role in the implementation of the Action Plan will continue to be essential. As already explained, regionalisation is the appropriate tool. The Common Fisheries Policy provides the tools for Member States to design fisheries measures best suited to serve those objectives taking into account the regional and local specificities, developments in innovation and technologies, and the weighing of the local environmental, economic and social impacts. Nothing has changed in this respect, the ACs have a specific role and status in stakeholder dialogue. The AC input is required to develop balanced and appropriate measures before they become legally binding. Opinions and recommendations of the ACs are most welcomed by the Commission at any stage, based on the expertise and interests of the AC. This input helps inform the policy development process. The special group created is a new tool that the Action Plan proposes, with the objective of bringing fisheries and environmental authorities together to improve the coordination of the implementation of environmental and fisheries legislation.

The group is not a substitute for the regionalisation process. It is a complementary forum, in which stakeholders, including ACs are welcome as observers. Therefore, I count on your involvement to achieve the goals of the Action Plan.

Should you have any further questions on this reply, please contact Ms Julia Rubeck, coordinator of the Advisory Councils (Julia.RUBECK@ec.europa.eu +32 2 29 68889), who will forward them to relevant colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

Charlina VITCHEVA

¹ <https://www.ices.dk/news-and-events/news-archive/news/Pages/InnovativeGear.aspx>