

Europêche contribution to the Call for Evidence on Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2040

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I. Policy context

Europêche welcomes the European Commission’s initiative to reflect on the future of fisheries and aquaculture towards 2040. However, we must begin with a fundamental point: **the sector does not need another vision—it needs immediate, concrete action.**

President von der Leyen has repeatedly called for Europe to move *from words to action*. Nowhere is this more urgent than in fisheries. The situation on the ground is deteriorating rapidly, and fishers across Europe are not asking for new strategies or communications—they are asking for solutions that make a difference today.

The EU fishing fleet is in **steep and accelerating decline**. Scientific and economic data show falling revenues, shrinking employment and a continuous reduction in fleet size¹. Employment alone has dropped dramatically over the past decade, and projections indicate that without corrective measures, a significant share of the fleet could disappear within a generation². This is not a theoretical concern—it is an ongoing reality affecting coastal fishing communities across Europe.

Table 2.2.2. Main results for the EU active fleet (excl. Greece) for 2013-2023 and nowcasts for 2024 and 2025.

EU (excluding Greece)		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	%Δ 2023-2022	%Δ 2023-avg 2013-2022	%Δ 2023-2013
Number of vessels	thousand	46.0	45.6	45.1	47.2	47.5	46.2	45.7	44.6	44.3	43.3	42.6	41.1	37.8	-1.7%	-6.5%	-7.4%
Total vessel tonnage	thousand GT	1,230.2	1,251.3	1,215.7	1,188.4	1,192.4	1,202.6	1,187.5	1,144.5	1,154.5	1,151.9	1,101.2	1,057.6	434.0	-4.4%	-7.6%	-10.5%
Total vessel power	thousand kW	4,506.1	4,507.1	4,447.7	4,400.8	4,400.9	4,341.4	4,352.7	4,187.5	4,222.6	4,182.0	4,053.6	3,857.4	1,850.3	-3.1%	-6.9%	-10.0%
Engaged crew	thousand	118.4	117.8	114.8	115.5	118.3	114.0	110.7	105.4	105.8	103.7	102.2	93.3	90.2	-1.4%	-9.1%	-13.7%
FTE national	thousand	84.3	84.3	85.2	84.6	82.9	80.5	76.6	67.2	69.2	65.1	62.1	58.0	57.9	-4.7%	-20.4%	-26.4%
Days at sea	thousand	4,754	4,644	4,585	4,603	4,476	4,320	4,181	3,693	3,930	3,679	3,729	3,720	3,402	1.4%	-13.0%	-21.6%
Fishing days	thousand	4,672	4,607	4,519	4,616	4,346	4,300	4,120	3,644	3,861	3,661	3,693	2,964	1,807	0.9%	-12.8%	-21.0%
Energy consumption	million litre	1,998	1,938	2,056	2,003	1,982	1,954	1,970	1,796	1,776	1,547	1,495	1,447	1,450	-3.3%	-21.4%	-25.2%
Live weight of landings	thousand tonnes	4,100	4,313	4,305	4,206	4,545	4,437	3,984	3,892	3,523	3,428	3,334	3,205	3,020	-2.8%	-18.1%	-18.7%
Value of landings	million EUR	7,367	7,578	7,227	8,074	7,937	7,709	7,146	6,311	6,684	6,705	5,856	5,641	5,604	-12.7%	-19.5%	-20.5%

At the same time, the EU is becoming increasingly dependent on imports to meet its seafood demand. Domestic production covers only a limited share of consumption, weakening Europe’s **food security and strategic autonomy**. In a context of geopolitical instability and conflict, this dependency is a serious vulnerability. Access to (sea)food cannot be taken for granted. Strengthening domestic seafood production must therefore be recognised as a key pillar of Europe’s broader economic, social and geopolitical resilience.

Against this backdrop, the proposed Vision 2040—while useful as a reflection exercise—risks arriving too late and remaining too abstract. As a Commission Communication, it is not designed to deliver binding measures or immediate change. Meanwhile, the ongoing revision

¹ STECF Annual Economic Report 2025 https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/stecf/stecf_25-07

² Economic situation and Outlook of the EU fishing fleets, September 2025 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/398247905_Economic_situation_and_outlook_of_the_EU_fishing_fleets

of the Common Fisheries Policy will be a long and complex process, with limited scope and delayed impact.

In this context, **the sector cannot wait**. What is needed now is not another layer of strategic thinking, but **an urgent, targeted response to the structural problems already identified**.

Europêche therefore calls for a clear shift in approach: from long-term vision-building to immediate corrective action. A key element of this shift must be the development of an **Omnibus fisheries proposal**, capable of addressing the multiple regulatory, economic and operational bottlenecks affecting the sector today.

This urgency does not diminish the importance of long-term sustainability. On the contrary, sustainability remains at the core of the European fisheries model. But it is essential to recognise that the sector has already delivered significant progress. As acknowledged by the Commission itself, biological sustainability indicators have improved markedly over the past decades thanks in particular to the efforts of fishers. European fisheries operate under one of the most advanced and stringent management systems in the world.

For this reason, the Vision must start from a fair and balanced premise: **fisheries are not the problem—they are part of the solution**.

At the same time, **the real drivers of environmental degradation must be addressed more decisively**. Pollution, eutrophication, climate change and other external pressures continue to affect marine ecosystems significantly. A policy framework that focuses disproportionately on fisheries while neglecting these factors risks being both ineffective and unfair.

Another critical dimension is the increasing **competition for maritime space**. The rapid expansion of offshore energy, infrastructure and protected areas is progressively reducing access to traditional fishing grounds. In many regions, this is no longer a matter of coexistence, but of displacement. Without a balanced approach, entire segments of the fleet risk losing their economic base.

In this context, fisheries must be recognised as a **strategic activity of overriding public interest**, essential for food production, territorial cohesion and cultural heritage. The Vision must ensure that fishing is not treated as a residual use of the sea, but as a priority that must be safeguarded alongside other maritime activities. Therefore, objectives must be set to support the sector. The Commission can consider the following non-exhaustive examples:

- **Reverse the trend in generational renewal**, shifting from decline to growth by 2040, ensuring a stable and attractive career path for young entrants into the sector.
- **Increase fleet renewal capacity³**, reaching a minimum of 1,250 new vessels per year. This would not only contribute to decarbonisation, safety and labour objectives, but also reflects the level required to maintain equilibrium with today's fleet of approximately 50,000 vessels, assuming an average economic lifespan of 40 years. By contrast, between 2015 and 2024, the average number of new constructions was only 335 vessels per year, dropping to around 150 in 2024—almost ten times below what is needed.

³ Salz, 2025, Economic situation and outlook of the EU fishing fleets

- **Reduce import dependency to 50% by 2040**, strengthening EU food production, sovereignty and resilience.
 - **A misleading narrative on the “business model”**

Europêche is concerned by recurring claims that the sector’s challenges stem from its “business model”. This overlooks the real issue: **a policy framework that is increasingly restrictive, complex and unbalanced.**

EU fishing enterprises already operate under some of the **strictest environmental, control and labour standards globally**, combined with rising costs and shrinking access to fishing grounds. The problem is not the business model—it is the conditions under which it is forced to operate.

The situation with shared stocks—particularly with Norway—clearly exposes this imbalance. For years, Norway has exceeded agreed fishing levels without triggering a firm and effective EU response, undermining stock sustainability. Instead of using strong instruments such as trade measures, the European Commission is proposing to address the situation by setting reduced quotas below those applied by neighbouring countries, **effectively penalising its own fleet.**

This results in:

- No level playing field,
- Self-imposed restrictions on compliant EU fishers,
- Sharp reduction of income and employment,
- And growing uncertainty for businesses.

This is not a failure of the sector—it is a **failure of governance and external policy enforcement.** If the EU is serious about the future of fisheries, it must **actively defend its fleet**, ensure reciprocity in shared stock management, and avoid unilateral decisions that weaken its own operators. Without this, no internal policy reform will succeed.

The sector does not need a state-controlled economic model that limits market dynamics. It needs a framework with clear sustainability objectives across all three pillars, while allowing the highest possible degree of flexibility for shipowners and captains to make decisions and use natural resources efficiently to meet the needs of society and consumers. All strategies and well-intentioned objectives are meaningless if there are no shipowners, captains and crews willing and able to operate and supply consumers. These actors must be recognised as central to the system.

In EU policy-making discussions, we too often see the same pattern: unrealistic targets followed by proposals to compensate the damage to the fleet with EU funding, impose activity bans, and displace fishing effort with the simplistic recommendation to “fish somewhere else or change the fishing gear”. This approach not only obliterates the sector and coastal communities but also ignores a basic question: where will the food come from?

Too often, fishers are treated as a bargaining tool between competing priorities. This must stop.

II. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how

Europêche supports the ambition of creating a coherent framework for the future of the sector. However, coherence alone is not sufficient. The success of Vision 2040 will not be measured by the quality of its analysis, but by its ability to deliver immediate, tangible improvements in the daily reality of fishers and to restore confidence so that new generations see a future in the sector.

The starting point must be a recognition that the current policy framework, while well-intentioned, has created significant operational and economic constraints. Increasing regulatory complexity, administrative burden and uncertainty have undermined competitiveness and discouraged investment.

This is why Europêche insists on the need for an **Omnibus fisheries proposal**. Such an initiative would allow the European Union to:

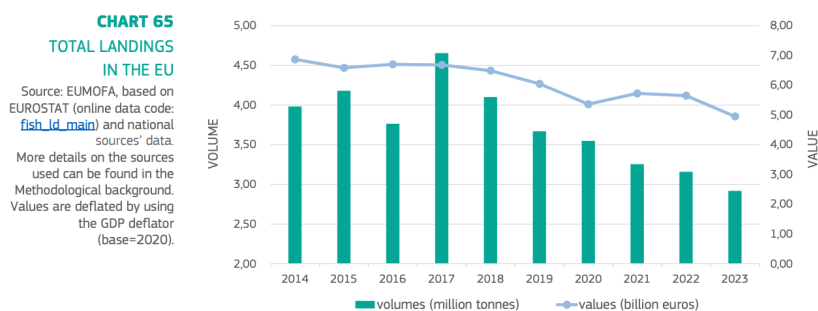
- Address inconsistencies across different pieces of legislation,
- Simplify procedures and reduce administrative burden,
- Correct unintended consequences of recent regulatory developments, including control measures
- Provide immediate relief to operators.

This approach is fully aligned with the Commission’s broader objective of simplification and competitiveness and practice in other related sectors such as agriculture.

Beyond simplification, restoring **economic viability** must be a central objective. Sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from economic and social realities. The three pillars—environmental, economic and social—must advance together.

Ensuring a **level playing field** is equally essential. European producers face increasing competition from imports that do not always comply with equivalent standards. This creates a structural disadvantage that undermines the sector’s competitiveness. The Vision must therefore strengthen trade policy instruments, enforce traceability and maintain a zero-tolerance approach to illegal fishing.

At the same time, Europe must invest in its own capacity to produce seafood. Promoting EU products, improving consumer awareness and supporting sustainable production are key elements of a broader strategy to enhance food sovereignty. Initiatives such as a **European Action Plan for Blue Foods** can play an important role in this regard. The EU must take urgent action to reverse the current downward trend in seafood production (see EUMOFA chart below).



Another decisive factor for the future of the sector is **generational renewal**. The difficulty in attracting young people is not only a matter of training or skills—it is fundamentally linked to the perception of the sector’s future. If fishing is seen as an activity in decline, subject to increasing restrictions and uncertainty, it will not attract new entrants. Reversing this perception requires a clear political signal: that **fisheries have a future in Europe**. For that reason, the negative narrative against certain fishing gears in the call for evidence at hand is extremely counterproductive and damaging.

The **energy transition** is also a key priority, but it must be approached pragmatically. Fishers are willing to contribute to decarbonisation, but this transition must be supported by adequate funding, technological solutions and realistic timelines.

Finally, maritime spatial planning must ensure **positive coexistence** between different uses of the sea. Fishing cannot systematically give way to other activities. The Vision must guarantee access to fishing grounds, recognise historical rights and ensure that any displacement is accompanied by fair compensation and genuine stakeholder involvement.

III. Better regulation

The Vision rightly highlights the importance of better regulation. For Europêche, this must translate into **real, tangible simplification**.

Reducing administrative burden is not a technical adjustment—it is a prerequisite for the survival of many fishing businesses. Simplification must therefore be ambitious, measurable and implemented without delay.

However, it is important to be clear: **better regulation alone is not enough if it is not accompanied by immediate corrective action**.

The ongoing CFP revision will take time and will not address many of the urgent issues affecting the sector today. The sector is still waiting for concrete action: an urgent revision of disproportionate Atlantic area closures, particularly impacting longline fisheries; a realistic adaptation of the Mediterranean management plan to avoid unsustainable cuts; targeted adjustments to control and funding rules; address dormant agreements with 3rd countries; a meaningful reduction of administrative burdens; a pragmatic reform of the landing obligation; just to mention a few. This is why Europêche reiterates its central message: the EU must act now, through an Omnibus proposal that delivers immediate results.

Stakeholder involvement will also be key. Fishers must not only be consulted—they must be actively involved in designing policies that are workable in practice. The use of expert groups and ensuring continuous dialogue across the value chain will be essential.

- **Claims regarding marine habitat destruction and fishing gear**

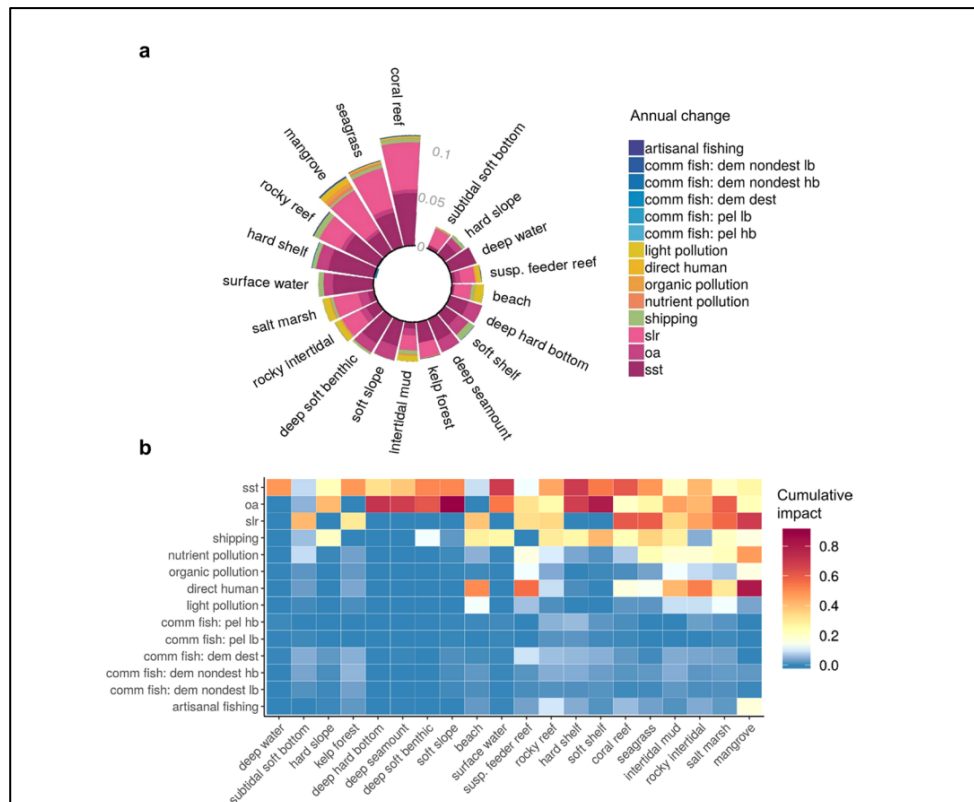
Europêche underlines the importance of protecting marine ecosystems and supports science-based, proportionate and targeted measures to ensure their long-term sustainability. In this context, scientific advice must improve, particularly in light of climate change and ecosystem regime shifts, to support better-informed and more effective management decisions.

However, the reference in the call for evidence to “*marine habitat destruction caused, for example, by fishing... and specifically by the use of gear which negatively impacts biodiversity*” raises **serious concerns** regarding balance, accuracy and policy framing.

Europêche is concerned that the Commission once again refers to fishing as an industry that generates habitat destruction, a characterisation that appears tailored to support a predetermined policy narrative rather than reflecting the diversity of fishing practices and the available scientific evidence. Such a prejudicial assessment overlooks the fact that EU fisheries operate under a solid regulatory framework, which already includes extensive spatial restrictions, technical measures and monitoring requirements. Many fisheries are MSC-certified, demonstrating that they meet internationally recognised sustainability standards, including with regard to ecosystem impacts and effective management.

The Commission narrative is creating significant legal, economic and operational uncertainty. A further illustration that the root causes of the sector’s challenges do not lie in its business model.

At the same time, this approach diverts attention from the main pressures affecting marine ecosystems. Scientific evidence consistently identifies climate change—particularly ocean warming, acidification and sea level rise—as the primary drivers of marine degradation. Measures that focus predominantly on restricting fishing activities, such as large-scale closures or gear bans, are therefore unlikely to address these underlying challenges or deliver meaningful improvements in ocean health.

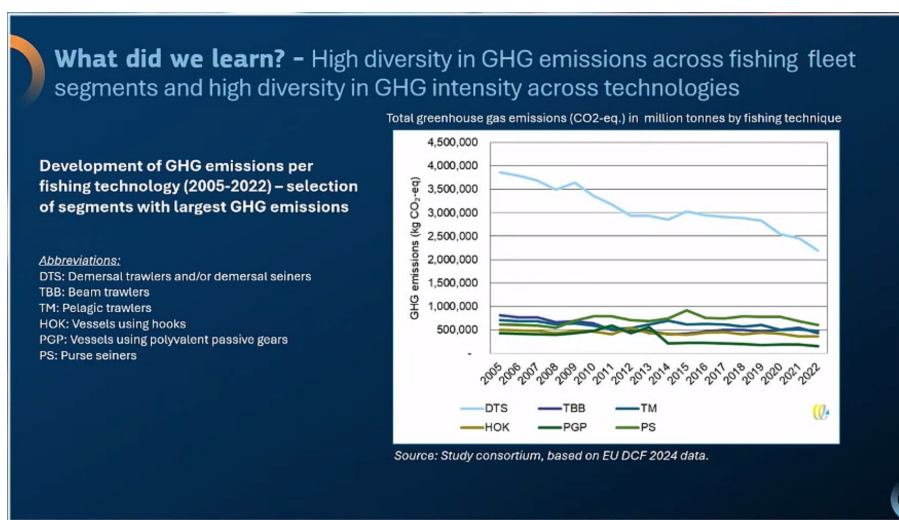


1. *Recent pace of change in human impact on the world’s ocean*⁴

⁴ https://escholarship.org/content/qt3t31m632/qt3t31m632_noSplash_ea8824bad96c72c9511dc8267af20cdd.pdf?t=qaogspage5

Furthermore, it should be recalled that:

- All food production systems entail environmental impacts, including fisheries,
- The EU fisheries management framework is specifically designed to **minimise impacts through science-based regulation**,
- And bottom-contact fishing activity is **already largely confined to historically fished areas**, where ecosystems have adapted to recurring disturbance.
- Fishing has reduced its emissions by 52% since 1990, specially from demersal fisheries (see chart below).



In this context, Europêche considers that future policy development should:

- Promote decarbonisation and environmental protection strategies that prioritise innovation and technological advancement, rather than reducing or eliminating fishing activity.
- Be based on robust, peer-reviewed scientific evidence,
- Include comprehensive environmental, social and economic impact assessments,
- Avoid blanket assumptions regarding specific gear types,
- And ensure that measures are targeted, proportionate and adapted to regional realities.

Europêche therefore calls for a **balanced, evidence-based and integrated approach**, addressing all relevant pressures on marine ecosystems while ensuring the continued sustainability and competitiveness of EU fisheries.

IV. Conclusion

The European fisheries sector stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, it has demonstrated its capacity to improve environmental sustainability, adapt to change and contribute to Europe's food system. On the other, it is facing a rapid and potentially irreversible decline.

In this context, the Vision 2040 must not become another well-intentioned document that arrives too late. It must mark a **decisive shift—from strategy to action**.

Without immediate action, the risk is clear: by the time 2040 arrives, much of the sector this Vision seeks to support will no longer exist.

Europêche therefore calls on the European Commission to act with urgency and ambition, and to translate this Vision into concrete measures—starting with an Omnibus fisheries proposal that delivers real change on the ground.