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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

Sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Communication provides further details on the status of European fisheries monitored in 2022. It also provides the Commission's proposals and consultations with third countries on fishing opportunities (FOs) for 2024. The aim is to improve the resilience of fishers, boost the recovery of stocks towards the maximum sustainable yield (MSY), and maintain healthy stocks at MSY level.

Far fewer fish stocks are now overfished and fishers are seeing socio-economic gains from certain stocks that have been managed at healthier levels for some time. However, high fuel prices have undermined the gains made, demonstrating the need to build resilience making the EU fishing fleet less reliant on fossil fuels and conserve fish stocks. To tackle the key challenges and improve the resilience of EU fisheries, the Commission launched a comprehensive and constructive cooperation process under the **Fisheries and Oceans package**[1]. It is crucial to continue this engagement and dialogue.

Since February 2022, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has had an impact on EU fisheries in several ways, especially in the Black Sea. It has led to ongoing disruptions of fishing activities and trade flows, had an impact on scientific advice and on certain negotiations at international level. This shows the importance of boosting resilience to ensure food security in Europe, of meeting the Green Deal objectives[2], and of taking further action on innovation and the energy transition, as highlighted by the Fisheries and Oceans package.

2. PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE FISHING IN THE EU

Sustainable fishing means catching no more fish than stocks can reproduce each year. A stock is fished sustainably at MSY when the ratio between actual fishing mortality (F) and fishing mortality at MSY (F_{MSY}) is below or equal to 1[3].

Thanks to the investments made by fishers and national administrations and the commitment from the European Parliament, Council and Commission to manage fisheries responsibly, fishing has become more sustainable and far fewer stocks are now overfished in the EU.

In 2003, most stocks of interest to the EU were heavily overfished and the median fishing mortality in the **Northeast Atlantic** was 1.68 F_{MSY}. The rate has since fallen, reaching the lowest value in 2021 at 0.76. In the **Mediterranean and Black Seas,** the median mortality

1 COM(2023) 100 final; COM(2023) 101 final; COM(2023) 102 final; and COM(2023) 103 final.
2 COM/2019/640 final
3 For a detailed analysis of F_{MSY} and the biomass state of fish stocks in all sea basins, see Section 1 of the accompanying staff working document.

rate fell from 2.06 F_{MSY} in 2003 to 1.7 in 2020[4], and the situation has improved with more stock assessments now available compared to the previous year. The fishing mortality rate has fallen the most in the eastern Mediterranean followed by the Black Sea and the western Mediterranean. There has been little change in the Central Mediterranean.

Where the fishing mortality rate has fallen, the biomass of fish stock is increasing[5]. This helps improve catches and the profitability of fisheries and increases their carbon-efficiency (in terms of kg of fish caught per kg of carbon emitted). To illustrate the value of sound management, in the Bay of Biscay, for the first time under the common fisheries policy[6] (CFP), no stocks were overfished in 2021. The growth of fish populations in that area has been remarkable, reaching more than three times the level of abundance recorded in 2003.

Landing declarations and sales notes are essential to monitor quota uptake and report aggregated catch data. Accurate reporting is vital as it is the basis for sustainable fishing and for reliable scientific data. Nonetheless, there continue to be problems in ensuring that all catches are recorded properly and counted against the quotas, given deficiencies in how Member States weigh all landed fishery products and accurately record them in catch registration documents. This is a recurring finding in evaluations conducted by the Commission across several sea basins in the previous years. The Commission has followed up on cases of non-compliance by opening another evaluation cycle in 2022 and infringement procedures requiring Member States to adopt measures to report their catches accurately.

On average, stocks in the Northeast Atlantic are now within the range consistent with the CFP objectives on fishing mortality rate. Though good progress has been made in 2022 towards the objectives set under the CFP, more progress is needed, especially in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

2.1 Fishing opportunities in 2023

The FOs are an important step in sustainable fisheries management. In the Atlantic, Baltic Sea and the Skagerrak/Kattegat, FOs are mainly defined as catch limits (known as total allowable catch (TACs)).

The **dramatically different environmental situation** in the **Baltic Sea and its rivers** continues to affect fish stocks and their development. There are various pressures in the **Baltic Sea** today, which have led to the degradation of the biodiversity. Today, these pressures include high pollution from nutrient inputs and persistently high levels of contaminants. This, in part, stems from failure to implement EU legislation[7]. Four out of ten fisheries (western

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4 The 2021 value is not yet available as the GFCM assessments were carried out with data up to 2020.

5 (+18% overall, +39% in northeast Atlantic, +6% in Mediterranean and Black Seas since 2003).

6 Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy.

7 In particular the Nitrates Directive, the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats and Birds Directives, the Waste Framework Directive, the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, the Single Use Plastic Directive, the Common Fisheries Policy Regulation, the Integrated Maritime Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy.

herring, the two cod stocks and salmon in the main basin) are not targeted anymore and may only be landed as by-catch. The remaining target fisheries are the other pelagics (sprat and herring in the central Baltic Sea, the Gulf of Bothnia and the Gulf of Riga) and plaice, with catch limits set in line with the MSY, and salmon in the Gulf of Bothnia and in the Gulf of Finland, with catch limits set in line with the precautionary approach. The Baltic Sea multiannual plan[8] (MAP) uses all tools, i.e. suspending target fisheries, setting TACs below maximum advised levels, spawning closures and limiting recreational fishing, to help ailing fish stocks recover. But unless the Member States fully apply and implement the EU legislation, these tools will not suffice to enable all fish stocks to recover. A commitment was made in the *Our Baltic* Ministerial Declaration to implement EU law in full; it is vital to do so[9].

Action to overcome the challenges related to pressures from pollution, eutrophication and climate change to the marine ecosystems, fisheries and aquaculture starts with input from the scientific community. Science enables policymakers to take informed decisions and to fully implement the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries and aquaculture management, one of the key principles of the common fisheries policy.

The **Skagerrak/Atlantic** waters have lower pressures on fish stocks and different environmental conditions. In these sea basins, the sustainable management of 29 stocks has delivered positive results with major increases in TAC in key commercial fisheries for 2023.

For stocks shared with the UK, both parties have agreed TACs, within the deadline set by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement[10], in line with MSY for most stocks where advice was available. For seven stocks (where the advice was for zero catches), the parties agreed to set a low catch limit for six stocks, covering only bycatches to prevent choking in mixed fisheries in line with the CFP Regulation[11]. For one stock, the parties agreed to monitor the TAC, following advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) on the level of the TAC[12]. The discussions held between the two parties in the framework of the Specialised Committee for fisheries were instrumental in streamlining the annual consultations and reaching a timing and satisfactory agreement[13].

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8 Regulation (EU) 2016/1139 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 establishing a multiannual plan for the stocks of cod, herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks.

9 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2020-09/ministerial_declaration_our_baltic_conference.pdf

10 Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the one part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the other part ST/5198/2021/INIT (OJ L 149, 30.4.2021, p. 10-2539).

11 Recital (51) of Council Regulation (EU) 2023/194 of 30 January 2023 fixing for 2023 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks, applicable in Union waters and, for Union fishing vessels, in certain non-Union waters, as well as fixing for 2023 and 2024 such fishing opportunities for certain deep-sea fish stocks

12 Written Record of fisheries consultations between the United Kingdom and the European Union for 2023: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/2023-eu-uk-fisheries-consultations_en.pdf.

13 For minutes of SCF meetings, see: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-non-eu-countries/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-trade-and-cooperation-agreement/meetings-eu-uk-partnership-council-and-specialised-committees-under-trade-and-cooperation-agreement/specialised-committee-fisheries_en.

Regarding **stocks shared between the EU, Norway and the UK**, the three parties agreed to set the TACs in line with MSY advice. For the continued recovery of North Sea cod, they rolled over the remedial measures and set the TAC for two stocks below the scientific advice due to their interaction with cod in mixed fisheries. The North Sea herring TACs were set in line with scientific advice, and parties agreed to continue catch limits to mitigate the impact on the depleted Western Baltic herring stock. The parties agreed to revise, in 2023, the current management model and the approach to setting TAC for North Sea herring[14]. The only assessed **stock shared bilaterally with Norway** was set at MSY level[15]. In this context, diverging from existing sharing arrangements for jointly managed stocks could have a negative impact on their status and jeopardise the objective of setting TACs at MSY levels.

For the **widely distributed stocks[16]** of mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring, the coastal states[17] agreed to set overall TACs at MSY level. However, in the absence of sharing arrangements, the sum of quotas from coastal states continues to exceed the overall TAC agreed. The EU took a responsible approach of no unilateral increases beyond the last agreed shares, which was not followed by all coastal states. This situation already puts pressure on the sustainability of these stocks. The Commission is in active discussions with other coastal states with the aim of concluding new sharing arrangements on sustainable stock management.

The **Mediterranean and Black Seas** are home to multispecies fisheries with many stocks shared with third countries. The fishing mortality rate has approached the sustainable level for some stocks, with seven having reached F_{MSY} in 2020, but many stocks are still fished above sustainable levels. Action must continue to reduce fishing effort and reach the MSY objective, in particular by applying the Western Mediterranean MAP[18] (West Med) and the 2030 Strategy of the General Fisheries Council of the Mediterranean (GFCM)[19]. FOs for 2023 are in line with a substantial set of measures adopted in 2022.

To achieve the MSY objective by 2025 under the **West Med** MAP, the FOs[20] take an integrated approach, building on management tools and developing the compensation mechanism that encourages the use of more selective gear and closure areas. Member States

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14 Record of fisheries consultation between the European Union, Norway and the United Kingdom for 2023: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/2023-eu-no-uk-fisheries-consultations_en.pdf.

15 Record of conclusion of fisheries consultation between Norway and the European Union on the regulation of fisheries in Skagerrak and Kattegat for 2023: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/2023-eu-norway-skagerrak-fisheries-consultations_en.pdf.

16 https://www.ices.dk/community/groups/pages/wgwide.aspx Working Group on Widely Distributed Stocks (WGWIDE) compiles and analyses data on large stocks of pelagic species, as well as other widely distributed and highly migratory species.

17 Coastal states in the Northeast Atlantic for the relevant stocks are the European Union, United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Russian Federation.

18 Regulation (EU) 2019/1022 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 establishing a multiannual plan for the fisheries exploiting demersal stocks in the western Mediterranean Sea and amending Regulation (EU) No 508/2014.

19 GFCM 2030 Strategy for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb7562en.

20 Council Regulation (EU) 2023/195 of 30 January 2023 fixing for 2023 the fishing opportunities for certain stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

are encouraged to continue taking measures under this mechanism. The Council has also set maximum catch limits for the most overfished deep-water shrimp and maintained ceilings to fishing effort for long liners.

Intensive work under the **GFCM**, supported by the EU's consistent position in regional fishery management organisations (RFMOs), has led to the adoption of significant decisions. Above all, it has led to five multiannual management plans, based on the principles of the common fisheries policy. This has led to the adoption of maximum catch limits for deep-water shrimp in the Ionian Sea, Levant Sea and the Strait of Sicily (including arrangements for hake) and maximum level of catches for blackspot seabream in the Alboran Sea. A GFCM long-term management plan for small pelagics in the Adriatic was agreed to provide high long-term yields consistent with MSY, lower catch limits in 2023 for anchovies and sardines, and a freeze of capacity for pelagic trawlers and purse seiners. The GFCM also continued implementing the multiannual plan for demersal stocks in the Adriatic, setting a maximum fishing effort limit for both bottom and beam trawlers, to achieve the MSY target in 2026 for all key stocks. It adopted harvest limits for red coral and a cap on fishing effort for common dolphinfish in international waters of the Mediterranean. For the Black Sea, TAC was set for turbot under the GFCM plan, and a Union autonomous quota set for sprat.

The EU also agreed on ambitious measures for **marine fisheries on European eel**[21] including extending of the closure at sea from three to six months to coincide with the juvenile eel migration and mature eels swimming between the sea and rivers. These measures will be subject to an increased monitoring of their implementation during 2023. The Commission will closely monitor progress in implementing the measures in the joint declaration on strengthening the recovery for European eel, signed by the Commission and some Member States.

3. STATE OF THE EU FLEET

Member States must keep fleets under the national ceilings set for vessel capacity (gross tonnage (GT)) and engine power (kW). They must reduce the capacity of fleets that are not in balance by reporting yearly on the biological and economic sustainability of fleets. Where there is evidence of an imbalance, they must present action plans to redress this within a clear timeframe. Any capacity withdrawn with public aid may not be replaced.

Since 2022, the number of vessels, GT and engine power has fallen by 0.3%, 0.7% and 0.5%, respectively. As a result, in December 2022, the EU registered fleet[22] comprised 72 472 vessels of 1 321 454 GT and 5 264 658 kW.

Member States indicate in their 2022 reports that their fleets are below the ceilings and meet the requirements under Article 22 of the CFP Regulation. However, concerns remain on the accuracy and reliability of the data underpinning the national reports and the existence or

[21] Article 13 of Regulation (EU) 2023/195.
[22] Including fleet active in the outermost regions.

accuracy of Member States action plans. In the CFP Communication[23], the Commission calls on Member States to increase the transparency and flexibility of their fishing capacity management, and facilitate possible reallocation of unused capacity for structural investment on board.

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Energy is one of the major cost items in the EU fishing fleet. The peak in fuel prices[24] had a high impact on the socio-economic performance of the EU fishing fleet in 2022. This impact follows the earlier interruption due to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 on positive economic performance trends; and the market disruption caused by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. It is estimated that for the entire EU fishing fleet, a 10 eurocent increase in the price of fuel reduces annual gross profit by €185 million (or 16% of 2020 annual gross profit). In several fleet segments using fuel-intensive gear, energy costs may represent up to half of the total value of landings.

As a result, the EU fishing fleet made an overall loss for the first time since 2008. However, after fuel prices peaked at €1.2 per litre in summer of 2022, prices have gradually fallen to €0.8-0.9 per litre in the first quarter of 2023. It is expected that, at current fuel prices, the EU fishing fleet can produce a gross value added of around EUR 2.5 billion, a gross profit close to €300 million, cover their operational costs and maintain jobs and salaries for 125 000 fishers in 2023. This is a significant improvement compared to 2022, when most EU fishing fleets were unable to cover their operational costs. However, current fuel prices, which remain 70% higher than 2021 prices, would generate very small to no net profit on average in 2023.

The impact of this performance is not even across all fleet segments. Broadly speaking, fleet segments that depend on stocks exploited sustainably and that increased their energy efficiency (or reduced their fuel intensity) tend to perform better and generate higher salaries for their crews despite the current adverse economic conditions. This illustrates **the important socio-economic gains in stock conservation and energy efficiency made by EU fishing fleets**.

The EU fishing fleet is expected to cover its operational costs and maintain employment in 2023 but it will remain financially vulnerable. This vulnerability is a result of the high level of energy intensity and dependence on fossil fuels. The Energy Transition Initiative[25] proposes several measures to help the sector accelerate its energy transition and reach the objective of climate neutrality by 2050. It includes actions to guide Member States on how to best use the funding available under the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund[26] (EMFAF) to support achieving the energy transition.

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23 COM/2023/103 final.

24 More than double in 2022 compared to average prices in 2021.

25 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Energy Transition of the EU fisheries and Aquaculture, COM(2023) 100 final.

26 Regulation (EU) 2021/1139.

To mitigate immediate consequences for the EU in 2022 resulting from the Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, the Commission took swift action in 2022 to trigger the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund[27] (EMFF) and the EMFAF to implement crisis support measures[28]. For the EMFF, 14 Member States have advanced with modifications of their operational programmes to unlock this support. The support can be combined with other crisis packages, in particular the Temporary Crisis Framework on State aid measures[29], with up to €300 000 available for companies in the fisheries and aquaculture sector until the end of 2023.

5. LANDING OBLIGATION

Research projects and cooperation between all stakeholders have generated valuable lessons on discard management under the landing obligation rules and on cooperation with stakeholders. They have increased knowledge of the (mitigation) tools, of the catch situation in different fisheries and sea basins and of how to avoid unwanted catches by using more selective fishing gear or techniques, taking area- or time-specific measures, or real-time closures.

The **EMFF and the EMFAF** (offering a high rate of public aid) provide support to implement the landing obligation. At the end of 2022[30], Member States had selected 5 160 operations with a total EMFF funding of €180.7 million for the landing obligation (up from 4 762 operations and €169.2 million the previous year). Most operations aimed to increase the added value or quality of unwanted catches[31], reduce the impact of fishing on the marine environment and eliminate discards[32].

Nevertheless, Member State action to monitor and enforce the landing obligation remains insufficient. The main risks associated with the landing obligation, such as illegal and undocumented discards of catches during fishing at sea, are not mitigated sufficiently. There is a need to prevent and deter current incentives for non-compliance[33] by monitoring and enforcement. The CFP Regulation recognises the difficulty in implementing the landing obligation in mixed fisheries where more than one species is present, where different species are likely to be caught in the same fishing operation, and where tools such as quota swaps are available.

Currently, Member States mostly use traditional monitoring techniques[34], which are insufficient[35]. The Parliament and Council have recently agreed on a revised fisheries control

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27 Regulation (EU) No 508/2014.

28 Regulation (EU) 2022/1278 and Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/500.

29 Communication from the Commission Temporary Crisis Framework for State aid measures to support the economy following the aggression against Ukraine by Russia 2022/C 131 I/01.

30 EMFF implementation report 2022, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries publication will follow.

31 Article 42 of the EMFF Regulation.

32 Article 38 and 39 of the EMFF Regulation.

33 These include illegal and undocumented discarding to avoid 'choke' situations, to maximise profit ('high-grading') and to reduce the costs of handling and storing low-value catches.

34 Such as inspections at sea, inspections at landing, data analysis and aerial surveillance.

system upon a Commission proposal, notably to mandate the use of remote electronic monitoring (REM) tools. The European Fisheries Control Agency assists Member States in preparing REM operational plans for pilot projects at regional and national level, and to identify the best possible strategies to monitor compliance.

Weak compliance, undocumented discarding and misreporting of catches undermines the accuracy of catch- data (landings, unwanted catches, and discards) and reporting, which underpin the quality of scientific advice. The Member States and the Commission work in 2023 with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries **(**STECF) to review the exemptions to the landing obligation to improve data. The Commission also conducted a study through CINEA[36] monitoring the implementation of the landing obligation for fisheries of Member States for the Baltic Sea, North Sea and Atlantic Western Waters. It is essential to improve monitoring and enforcement to ensure catch data is accurate as the scientists use the data reported in logbooks and collected under the Data Collection Framework[37] to underpin scientific advice. As highlighted in the Communication on the CFP[38], data accuracy is essential to the evaluations that help the Commission decide whether EU action should be continued or adjusted.

6. MAIN MESSAGES AND ORIENTATIONS FOR 2024 FISHING OPPORTUNITIES PROPOSALS

6.1. Key stages to setting the next fishing opportunities

The Commission will base its 2024 proposals for FOs on the scientific advice issued by the ICES and STECF, including ecosystem considerations, on the decisions taken during international negotiations with third countries, on decisions taken by the RFMOs in 2023 and on a socio-economic analysis.

The Commission will cover as many stocks as possible in its initial proposals taken into account the necessary timely delivery of the scientific advice.

The Commission invites Member States and stakeholders to assess the scientific advice as soon as it is publicly available. Stakeholders can also make recommendations through Advisory Councils, national authorities and individually.

The Commission will conduct various consultations with the UK, Norway and other coastal states starting in October, with the aim of concluding in time to process the outcome into the December Council.

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35 Several Member States have agreed to participate in an EFCA-coordinated REM pilot project to learn best practice on REM controls (one or two vessels per Member State). Denmark uses REM in the nephrops fleet operating in the Kattegat and the Netherlands is conducting a fully documented fisheries scheme on a few vessels in the North Sea. Neither project is being used for control and enforcement purposes.

36 https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/89868cc6-015f-11ec-8f47-01aa75ed71a1

37 Regulation (EU) 2017/1004.

38 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, The common fisheries policy today and tomorrow: a Fisheries and Oceans Pact towards sustainable, science-based, innovative and inclusive fisheries management, COM/2023/103 final.

As well as setting FOs, the Commission will work throughout the year to achieve progress on sharing arrangements for widely distributed stocks with third countries that lack such arrangements, to ensure shared stocks are fished in a sustainable manner.

6.2. Setting fishing opportunities for different sea basins

For stocks managed only by the EU in **the Baltic Sea, Skagerrak/Kattegat and the Atlantic**, the Commission will propose quotas in line with the MSY when this advice is available. Where management plans provide flexibility to set catch limits, the Commission may propose using the upper range of MSY for healthy stocks, provided that the scientific advice considers it necessary to achieve the objectives under the MAPs especially for mixed fisheries. For stocks where the scientific advice is zero catch or where the biomass has decreased so much that they are below a safe limit, the Commission will propose remedial measures as outlined in each multiannual plan to rebuild the stocks. It will focus action on getting full MSY scientific evaluation for other key stocks as soon as possible.

For the landing obligation, it will deduct the *de minimis* or high survivability exemptions from the ICES advice where appropriate. The Commission will also evaluate Member States' progress in implementing the current by-catch reduction measures that are accompanying unavoidable by-catch only TACs adopted to alleviate potential choke situations.

The Commission plans to move, where possible, to a system of multiannual TACs for EU-only stocks. This will increase efficiency and predictability for the EU fishing businesses for stocks selected in close consultation with Member States, stakeholders and ICES. Member States are asked to list priority stocks for which they recommend 2-year TACs. Following an assessment, the Commission will ask ICES to assess the stocks identified:

(i) against the ICES multiannual advice criteria;
(ii) in terms of multiannual advice feasibility; and
(iii) in terms of the possible implications of such multiannual advice.

For shared stocks managed with the **UK, Norway and other coastal states**, the EU will continue to base its position on the best available scientific advice, with the objective of setting FOs in line with MSY. The EU will follow up on joint EU-UK commitments in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries, with the aim of achieving sustainable fishing and management of shared stocks. It will follow up on similar commitments in the trilateral framework (EU, UK, Norway), and in seeking sustainable and comprehensive sharing arrangements for coastal state stocks. This work is part of the external dimension of the common fisheries policy and covers some 70% of all TACs set in the Northeast Atlantic. The Commission will endeavour to improve cooperation and the climate of these consultations.

For the **Mediterranean and Black Seas**, it is essential that Member States continue to pursue the objectives of the West Med MAP and of the GFCM under the 2030 Strategy. The Commission encourages Member States to implement accompanying measures under the EMFAF programmes. As this is the final year of the transitional period of the MAP, the proposal for FOs will aim for full implementation to achieve MSY by 1 January 2025 at the latest for all stocks, following a holistic approach. In particular it should include the available

management tools and the compensation mechanism to improve gear selectivity and area closures. STECF evaluates implementation of the MAP annually. The Commission has also launched work on each aspect of sustainability with a view to reporting in July 2024 on the results and impact of the plan on the stocks and the fisheries concerned.

Shared stock management is also necessary to ensure sustainability in international waters and to secure a level playing field in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. To this end, the proposal for FOs in 2024 will cover measures stemming from GFCM measures already in force and additional measures to be adopted at the November GFCM annual session. For Black Sea species, the Commission will propose TACs and quotas for turbot in line with the measures to be adopted at the annual session, and for sprat.

The progress made in the Mediterranean and Black Seas must continue and accelerate in the GFCM high-level conference in Malta in 3-4 October 2023. All Member States must continue action to achieve the sustainability of stocks as this is the basis for a resilient fishing sector, and for protecting the ecosystems in this sea basins.

Given the need to improve protection of **European eel**, in addition to closely monitoring implementation of the 2023 FOs and assessing the measures for 2024 for marine waters, the Commission calls on Member States to improve their eel management plans under the Eel Regulation, in line with their environmental obligations[39]. It is important to step up measures in inland waters to create a level playing field as the eel mortality rate in inland waters is significant and needs urgent remedial action. The GFCM is currently working on future long-term management plans, notably for European eel and common dolphinfish for which current measures are ending 2023.

7. CONCLUSION

The sustainability of EU fisheries improved in 2022. But the situation in the Baltic Sea remains challenging, where some previously important commercial stocks are declining due to various pressures. Climate change affects human activities, the intensity of the pressures and some aspects of state, as well as the links between these. More action and greater commitment is required to tackle the situation in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

The Commission proposals for FO 2024 will seek to enable stocks to recover and to consolidate the fish stocks that have reached sustainable levels. This will boost the resilience of fishers. Further implementation by Member States of the EU legislation is important as well as the continued effort by the Commission on actions to address the other pressures on fish stocks. The EU is fighting marine pollution through a number of legislative and policy initiatives under the broader framework of the zero pollution action plan[40].

[39] COM(2023) 102.

[40] These include setting limits to marine litter, underwater noise, nutrients and contaminants under the MSFD and implementing measures to achieve them. COM/2021/400 final

As stated in the Fisheries and Oceans package, we now need to see a greater commitment to make our marine areas and European fisheries fit for the future. A thriving fisheries sector is key to preserving European coastal communities and to managing the transition to more sustainable food systems.

The Commission invites Member States, Advisory Councils, stakeholders and the public to provide feedback on this Communication by 31 August 2023.

PLANNED WORK SCHEDULE[41]

When	What
May-November 2023	ICES scientific advice
June-end August 2023	Public consultation on the Communication
End August 2023	Commission adopts the proposal for FOs in the Baltic Sea
October - December 2023	Annual consultations on FOs with the UK, with the UK and Norway, and with Norway
Mid-September 2023	Commission adopts the proposal for FOs in the Mediterranean and Black Seas
October 2023	Council meeting on FOs for the Baltic Sea Coastal states consultations on widely distributed stocks in the north-east Atlantic
End October 2023	Commission adopts the proposal for FOs in the Atlantic/North Sea
7-11 November 2023	GFCM annual session
1 December 2023	STECF stock assessment and management advice
December 2023	Council meeting on FOs in the Atlantic/North Sea Council meeting on FOs in for the Mediterranean and Black Seas

[41] For RFMO-managed stocks in EU waters and certain non-EU waters, fishing opportunities are adopted after the annual meeting of the RFMOs by revising the Council regulation setting the fishing opportunities.