

## REPORT

Meeting: **European Parliament event: Is bottom trawling in the EU sustainable? A new perspective under the European Commission's Action Plan**

Parties: **MEP Niclas Herbst, EU fisheries stakeholders, DG ENV representative, researchers**

Date: **28 November 2023**

Location: **European Parliament, Brussels**

Moderator: **Ernesto Penas Lado**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

This event explored the key scientific research on bottom trawling sustainability and compatibility with Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). It also looked at the trade-offs between the environmental impact of fisheries and seafood security/self-sufficiency.

**Ernesto Penas Lado** opened the event by saying that bottom fishing is seen as controversial, but at the same time it fulfils a function of providing sustainable food. The effects of bottom fishing can be mitigated through effective management and innovation. Restrictions on bottom fishing would require alternatives that are not always equally or more sustainable.

**MEP Niclas Herbst (EPP)** gave an opening statement noting that any policy decisions should be based on robust science even in cases when it does not fit the predominant political position. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed: pollution, microplastics, climate change and related ocean warming. While dealing with this, the legislators seems to give an impression that the fishing industry is to blame for all of these. Bottom fishing seems particularly to be the scapegoat. This was especially pronounced in the Marine Action Plan, which aims to tackle the implementation of MPAs by excluding bottom fishing from these areas and which is incoherent, lacks consideration of socio-economic and scientific conclusions, and is legally disputable. He noted that the PECH committee, as well as the Member States expressed their disagreement with the Plan, particularly in light of the fact that 70% of our seafood is currently imported with this percentage increasing. European fisheries should be protected, not least by genuinely following the latest scientific findings in relation to bottom trawling. He expressed hope that the new Commission will be more included to listen to fishers, and incorporate their experience and knowledge into their future policymaking.

The first panel consisted of three scientists: **Dr Michel Kaiser, Dr Hans Polet and Dr Jan Geert Hiddink**, who presented their work on bottom trawling in relation to their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, bottom contact and carbon sequestration in the seabed.

**Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University**, presented a paper on evaluating the sustainability and impacts of trawling compared to other food production system. Bottom trawling accounts

for 26% of global marine fisheries catches. Science is trying to understand impacts and work with the industry on how to reduce impacts that are inevitable in any food production system. It is clear that the consequences of banning bottom trawling would be significant. In Europe in particular huge efforts were made in terms of improving the state of stocks and ecosystems. Stocks in North East Atlantic have significantly improved spawning stock biomass (SSB). Climate change has significant impact on the state of stocks, though some (i.e. North Sea cod) fare pretty well.

Kaiser noted that the issue with bottom trawling is not only its impact on stocks but also on seabed. However, majority of shelf areas are not adversely affected by trawling. Mediterranean and Adriatic sea are the worst impacted seas in Europe. In terms of bycatch, bottom trawls have the highest rate of discards, though this can be further mitigated. The industry is aware of the problem and is actively seeking solutions (i.e. spatial measures, gear modifications etc.)

In terms of gear efficiency in food production and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, static gears are the least efficient, as there is lots of stopping and restarting of engines and the catch is small.

In general, seafood mostly outperforms other forms of food production in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> footprint. When fisheries are managed effectively and based on good science, they can be very efficient. Science is therefore key to sustainable management of fisheries resources.

Next was **Jan Geert Hiddink** from **Bangor University** who presented a paper on quantifying carbon benefits of ending bottom trawling. He noted that it is important to think about this since the seabed is a carbon sink. There are two contradictory forces present: trawl gear disturb the sediments, which causes sediment mixing and increased conversion of organic carbon in the sediment into CO<sub>2</sub> which contributes to climate change; but trawling also kills invertebrates, which increases the potential for sediments to store carbon. However, the balance between them is unclear. More needs to be known about carbon cycle in sea sediments.

He mentioned the Sala et al. paper on a model which made trawling seem comparable to aviation industry in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. However, it was soon discovered that there was an issue with the way organic carbon is stored according to the model. Degradation rate was overestimated by a factor of 100-1000, consequently overestimating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions caused by trawling.

He concluded that currently not enough is known about carbon sequestration in sediments and more efforts are needed to understand the negative and positive effects of trawling.

**Hans Polet, ILVO**, presented the Belgian approach to the issue of sustainability in fishing considering sea floor disturbance. He started by saying that there a difference between trawling in static and vulnerable seafloor (high impact) and dynamic areas (low impact).

In Belgium, fisheries are being marked with an indicator measuring pressure of the gear and the depth of seafloor disturbance as well as depletion rate (amount of killed animals per passage). Impact is calculated through pressure and sensitivity of the fishing grounds. For each fishing vessel is data is deducted about their time spent on sensitive seafloor. According to the data, 95% of fishing effort is carried out on low to medium sensitive fishing grounds.

He mentioned that there is a covenant (formal agreement) between the fisheries, local NGOs, and scientists. The indicators inform about the sustainability of each vessel and fishers are in turn able to understand their impact and modify their behaviour to improve sustainability.

Within this programme fishers are using selective devices. Various data (satellite imagery, catch, fuel consumption, tension in towing line) is being collected real time and fed into ILVO (scientific institute). Camera systems to analyse catches is in development and will be deployed in a couple of years. Fishers provide this data voluntarily. Data is treated confidentially and feedback is provided to the fishers.

Beam trawling, which is stuck with a bad reputation, actually covers very small area of seabed and is by nature very manoeuvrable. Fishing can be done in very narrow stretches of sand. The fishing methods allows to select non-vulnerable areas.

He concluded by saying that the impact of present-day beam trawling is low in sandy areas. Beam trawling allows for so-called “precision-fishing”. Valuable data is currently being collected in collaboration with the industry to evaluate and make management decisions. This is a positive example of good collaboration with the fishers in finding solutions.

The second panel consisted of **Veronica Manfredi, DG Environment, Vera Coelho, Oceana, and Ivan Lopez, EBFA.**

**Veronica Manfredi, DG ENV**, explained that the intention of the Marine Action plan was never to demonize bottom fisheries, but to secure that fisheries stay vibrant and sustainable. She acknowledged that seafood imports should be decreased.

She mentioned the Joint Special Group on Marine Action Plan and the constructive dialogue it fostered. There is still scope for better management of fisheries, especially in vulnerable areas. She noted that the Commission has been looking at the sea in a holistic manner, considering the objectives of the EU Green Deal.

The matter of carbon sequestration will continue to be studied and further commitment was placed on listening to science. Action Plan looks to create dialogue between the different strains of science, stakeholders and policymakers. A well-managed MPAs are essential to ensure healthy ecosystems and viable fishing communities. Further collaboration needs to be ensured to reconcile all the different objectives, such as clean energy through wind power installation, food production, nature conservation etc.

**Vera Coelho, Oceana**, started by saying that MPAs are needed for biodiversity but also proven to be beneficial for fisheries outcomes. The higher the level of protection of these areas, the better the benefit for fisheries that surround it. In Europe, there are legal obligations to protect marine species and habitats and restore them to favourable conservation status. In addition, there is a political commitment by 2030 to have 30% of seas protected.

Despite of decades of work on conservation, the status of species and habitats is still poor. In light of climate crisis, the needs for restoration of ecosystems is great. Natura2000 areas in Europe are not well managed and do not restrict fishing activity, making them only “paper parks”.

In 2021, a study on intensity of bottom activity in Spain showed that bottom fishing intensity in MPAs is even higher than outside of MPAs. Today, new analysis was published on official VMS data, from which 3/4 bottom trawlers in Spain have operated in MPAs last year. This should not be the case, if areas are to be protected, which is acknowledged by the European Court of Auditors and by the Commission in their Marine Action Plan. It is a failure to manage fisheries in a way that does not protect marine biodiversity, which is where Marine Action Plan comes in, containing a lot of measures introducing a timeline for member states and elements of support to aid MS in this task which is admittedly complex, but is not introducing any new measures.

The focus is on bottom trawling as this is among the most damaging activities in our seas. The issues of bycatch, fuel intensity, sustainability issues, its impact on the seabed are all aspects that call for better regulation of bottom fishing.

Action plan is criticised to be banning all bottom fishing, but banning bottom trawling in MPAs will not have a huge impact on food production and actually can benefit seafood production due to spillover effect.

Coelho felt there was a false dichotomy between bottom trawling and land based protein. She concluded that more seafood should be produced with much less damaging methods. The Action Plan is an overdue attempt to restore marine environment.

**Ivan Lopez, EBFA**, started by saying that bottom trawling has an impact on the environment just like any other food production system. In his view, banning bottom trawling makes no sense, as similar calls are not replicated for land-based food production.

The Commission said dialogue with stakeholders is needed yet, he felt, the action plan denies all of this. He also recalled big reactions about this in the PECH committee and the Council. No local community and no stakeholder from fisheries had anything to do with the Action Plan as it currently stands.

He was hoping that past errors would not be repeated and that the experts at sea would be able to decide the policy that affects them, however this did not happen with the Action Plan. He felt that fisheries sector is being demonized as there was no other reference to any other damaging sector such as for example wind parks. Fisheries have huge impact on local communities with certain coastal areas only depending on fisheries. He also felt there was no coherence.

He added that there is a good opportunity of combining good management, science and fisheries. Scientists were not sufficiently taken into account in the Action Plan. There seem to have been a curious coincidence in the alignment of what Commission advocates for in the Action Plan and the agendas of some NGOs. The goal of both appears not to be the sustainability of food systems.

Debate will now ensue on how the Commission intends to support sustainable food production and how to measure the trade-offs and displacements and how imports affect local consumption and local sustainability of the food system. The Action Plan does not consider these important consequences.

The floor was opened for MEPs.

**MEP Anja Haga** (Christian Democrats) noted the need to find a middle ground and think about how can we combine fishing and biodiversity protection. Three topics will be important: protecting nature with clean oceans, less CO2 emissions etc., but there are also consumers who want to eat sustainable fish. It is currently difficult to know which fish is fished in a sustainable way. Tailored-made fishing functions well with biodiversity protection efforts, which should be making fish stocks healthy and and local communities vibrant. It is possible to use the most sustainable fishing techniques with tailored made fishing. Management should allow for dialogue to happen between the different actors.

**MEP Francisco Millan Mon** (EPP) felt that the Commission is “obsessed with fishers” and pointing fingers to bottom trawling as only responsible sector for environmental degradation is irresponsible. Bottom fishing should not be treated as the ultimate scapegoat. He noted that ICES also states that some levels of bottom trawling can be compatible with MPAs. He concluded that bottom trawling is one of the most regulated fishing technique in Europe and that provisions in the Action Plan to phase out bottom fishing from MPAs by 2030 is not in line with realistic expectations for the sector. He also noted that fishing is an economic activity and called for a separation of the fisheries portfolio from that of the environment.

The main conclusion of the event was that unilateral and blanket approaches are unhelpful when designing restricting measures to protect the environment at the expense of other important social and economic functions. Instead, nuanced positions and broader science should be employed, so that all aspects of sustainability are addressed. One important observation was also that only a genuine collaboration with the fishing stakeholders yields management that is readily complied with.