

REPORT

Meeting: **Inter-AC**

Parties: **Commissioner Kadis, DG MARE, AC Chairs & Secretariats, stakeholders**

Date: **8-9 April 2025**

Location: **Brussels, BE and online**

Chair: **Stelios Mitolidis, Director MARE Unit D**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

Day 1 – 8 April 2025

1. Opening speech by Commissioner Kadis

Commissioner Costas Kadis, commended the Advisory Councils for their dedicated work in advancing sustainable fisheries management. He expressed high appreciation for their role in supporting the implementation of the CFP. Emphasizing the urgent need to address climate change impacts, spatial constraints, and sustainability in all its dimensions (social, economic, and environmental) he reaffirmed his commitment to a resilient and future-proof sector. Key policies and initiatives are already underway, including the development of the **Ocean Pact**, the **evaluation of the CFP**, and the launch of a long-term vision for **Fisheries and Aquaculture 2040**, alongside a strategic approach to the EU's external fisheries policy.

The **Ocean Pact** seeks to place collaboration at the core of ocean governance, affirm the ocean's strategic value to the EU, and ensure sustainable management for future generations.

The CFP remains the EU's main tool to ensure long-term environmental, economic, and social sustainability. The current CFP evaluation will conclude in early 2026. This, together with other initiatives such as the ETP, Fishers of the Future, and the **external fisheries policy**, will allow to shape a long term vision for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture sectors for 2040. A holistic approach is essential, considering the entire value chain, skills development, and alignment with the Ocean Pact.

On **External Action**, the EU has made progress through stronger regional management organizations and transparent, sustainable agreements. However, global fish stocks continue to decline amid rising competition and shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics. The future external policy must respond to these realities with a new, context-sensitive framework. Contributions to shaping this strategy are strongly encouraged, as it will be integral to the 2040 vision.

2 Roundtable on the Vision for EU Fisheries & Aquaculture in 2040 with Commissioner Costas Kadis

On behalf of the NSAC, **ExCom Chair Kenn Skau Fischer** emphasized the critical role of Advisory Councils in fisheries management and stakeholder engagement, especially during the CFP evaluation. He praised the case-by-case approach to bottom trawling in MPAs and emphasized the need for strong scientific evidence as the basis for all management decisions, considering both environmental and socio-economic impacts. Referring to the recent increased involvement of ACs in ICES advice request formulation, he thanked MARE C3 and ICES for the willingness to collaborate. He called for a sustainable, viable North Sea demersal fleet by 2040, achievable through a collective approach to challenges. Additionally, Fischer pointed to fragmented EU governance and competing maritime pressures, urging support for initiatives like the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative for cross-sector collaboration. He also called for more adaptable regulatory frameworks to support innovative, efficient fishing gear. Addressing external governance, he stressed the need for cooperation with third countries like the UK and Norway to manage shared stocks sustainably. On the social dimension, he raised concerns over workforce challenges in the sector. He welcomed the Commission's efforts to promote fair working conditions, gender equality, and overall social responsibility. In conclusion, Fischer reaffirmed the NSAC's commitment to shaping a resilient, sustainable future for EU fisheries.

The interventions of the ten other ACs highlighted several key priorities that should shape the 2040 Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture:

- The Vision should promote inclusive, multispecies, and multisectoral governance based on ecosystem-based management, responsive to climate change and land-based pressures.
- Greater policy coherence and coordination across EU institutions and Member States is needed to prevent contradictions and regulatory overlap
- Harmonization of rules across countries is essential to ensure a level playing field.
- Socio-economic resilience of coastal communities must be prioritized, recognizing fisheries' vital role in livelihoods and local economies.
- The next MFF should maintain a dedicated EMFAF to ensure sustainable funding for the sector and support EU food security and sovereignty.
- Modernisation, competitiveness, and food security should be central pillars of the Vision.
- Given the strong influence of pricing on consumer decisions, policies must incorporate consumer-centric strategies.
- The continued decline in EU fleet size since 1996 must be assessed against current environmental and policy needs, ensuring that capacity reflects real sustainability goals.
- Beyond traditional data collection, there is a pressing need to invest in data collaboration and computation capacity.

- Fisheries and aquaculture products must be fully integrated into EU food policy and future governance structures.
- The Vision must also recognize the crucial role of ACs as structured spaces for stakeholder dialogue, ensuring they are central to the co-decision process and not sidelined by parallel stakeholder dialogues.

The Commissioner expressed appreciation for the broad alignment among Advisory Councils on the MFF. The Commissioner invited ACs to provide concrete recommendations on **how to achieve simplification** without undermining sustainability or the robustness of EU fisheries management.

3 Round table on the Vision for EU Fisheries in 2040 – continuation with Mr Stelios Mitodolis

Stelios Mitodolis Director MARE Unit D, invited the ACs to provide further input on the Vision for EU Fisheries in 2040.

Fischer raised a key question: is fish still being considered as food in EU policy discussions? He pointed out that recent research and policy papers on food sovereignty often fail to mention fish for human consumption, an omission determined by siloed thinking across policy domains. He emphasized that from a consumer perspective, fisheries must be integrated into the broader food system discourse. Fischer also referred to last year's adoption of the Nature Restoration Law, which involves significant work on fisheries and seawater protection. However, he observed a disconnect: stakeholders working on environmental policy were largely unaware of parallel work being done in the fisheries sector. He stressed the need for better integration of fisheries considerations in the implementation of the NRL. Finally, he highlighted the importance of improved coordination between environmental and fisheries policy areas in preparation for the upcoming United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) in Nice, where the Ocean Pact will be presented.

Other interventions highlighted that:

- Many policies are handled at Member State level rather than the EU, leading to inconsistent support measures. The MSFD and MSPD are EU-driven but delegated to MS, causing fragmentation and impacting fisheries.
- Current implementation of the CFP heavily focuses on the MSY pillar, while social and economic dimensions are underdeveloped. Some stocks still decline despite meeting the MSY objectives. Legislative tools such as multiannual plans overlook social impacts. The Landing Obligation, aimed at reducing discards, lacks labour and safety impact assessments.
- The energy transition must support fisheries in adopting carbon-neutral technologies, which requires proper infrastructure and fuel access.
- Local and empirical knowledge should be integrated with formal science, with quota systems reflecting this expertise to preserve community-based practices.

Day 2 – 9 April 2025

1. Dialogue with DG MARE on key fisheries topics related to the CFP

1.1 Vision for 2024

Joan Roussouliere-Azzam (D3, DG MARE) provided an update on the Vision for EU Fisheries 2040. The aim is to develop a coherent, value-chain-based vision aligned with the Commissioner’s agenda. Key policy frameworks to be considered include the Competitiveness Compass, Nature Restoration Law, European Green Deal, Communications on Implementation and Simplification, Union of Skills, and the Vision for Agriculture and Food. Two major upcoming files are the Multiannual Financial Framework (July 2025) and the MED Pact (late 2025).

Within DG MARE, relevant work includes the CFP evaluation, energy transition roadmap, “Fishers of the Future” foresight project (presented January 2025), the European Ocean Pact, a new EU Ocean R&I strategy, and external fisheries actions—covering new-generation SFPAs, BBNJ ratification, and post-2026 UK access negotiations.

The Vision will consider both demand and supply: evolving consumer demand for sustainable fish, and the ability to meet this with sustainably caught and processed products. Labour, skills, tools, infrastructure, and cost-efficiency across the value chain are key. The core question is: what is needed for thriving fisheries and aquaculture sectors? ACs are invited to reflect and contribute their structured input.

On behalf of NSAC, **Industry Vice-Chair Peter Breckling** emphasized that planning for the future must start with assessing the current situation and emerging trends. He highlighted the need to prioritize food sovereignty, given the shift from the EU being a top market for producers to facing increased competition and growing import dependency. Signals from Norway, including linking fishing rights to trade and openness to new markets, underline the urgency. With declining food supply and increasing dependency on imports, EU policies must strengthen domestic production, focusing not only on sustainability and animal welfare, but also on ensuring sufficient supply for EU consumers.

Other ACs raised key concepts:

- Timelines and geographic applicability of EU objectives should be more flexible and context-specific.
- Infrastructure in ports must align with national regulations and administrative frameworks.
- Discrepancy in regulatory stringency between EU products and imports undermines fairness and sustainability.
- Fish welfare is a major issue that needs greater attention in fisheries and aquaculture policies.
- Worker qualification requirements present a barrier to entering the profession.

- Consumer choices are driven mainly by price, appearance, and origin. Sustainability factors appear to come later. Enhanced consumer information and understanding are key, especially willingness to pay for sustainability.
- Starting the vision from a consumer lens is important but must be balanced with sector realities.
- Fisheries should be seen as part of nutrition, culture, economy, and employment—not just economic output.

1.2 EU Ocean Pact

Iglika Yacova (A3, DG MARE) provided an update on the development of the Ocean Pact.

The call for evidence has received an overwhelming number of contributions (over 900 submissions and 170 policy papers) reflecting a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including fisheries associations, multinational companies, and international actors from countries such as Norway, the UK, the USA, and Switzerland.

The Ocean Pact is being shaped into a strategic, holistic, and succinct document, reflecting shared commitments and today's ocean-related realities. Its core focus is on fostering a sustainable and competitive blue economy, ensuring blue security, restoring and protecting ocean health, supporting coastal and island communities, and addressing international dimensions through diplomacy. The Pact adopts a Source-to-Sea approach, grounded in science-based principles, the ecosystem approach, and the precautionary principle.

Breckling emphasized the need for the Pact to have a strategic approach that encourages reflection on the current governance system and leads to concrete action. From the North Sea perspective, he highlighted the increasing competition for marine space and questioned whether existing instruments are adequate to manage this challenge, especially considering the impacts of climate change, such as shifting fish stocks and the emergence of invasive species. He raised the need for enhanced spatial planning tools and potentially a scientific task force to respond to these evolving issues. There is also a need to reassess reference points and define concrete priorities that inform political decision-making. This includes the capacity to conduct proper social and economic impact assessments across the entire system and value chain.

In their interventions, the other 10 ACs stressed that the Ocean Pact should:

- Reflect the real economic and social conditions of EU coastlines, recognizing fishers not as the problem but as potential contributors to solutions, as well as acknowledge broader anthropogenic impacts from more powerful sectors.
- Include recognition of warming oceans, eutrophication, and pollution as major threats to marine ecosystems and highlight the importance of tackling land-based sources of marine impact and ensuring effective traceability and control systems.
- Acknowledgement that outlined ambitions require strong financial support for effective implementation.

Yacova welcomed the constructive suggestions, noting they will feed into DG MARE's work. She explained that the Ocean Pact will be a 20-page strategic document, accompanied by a roadmap, and will remain concise and implementation-oriented.

Rather than setting new binding targets, the focus will be on delivering on existing ones, with a strong emphasis on local stakeholders' roles in implementation. Lastly, the Ocean Pact will adopt a sea basin approach to reflect the diverse realities of Member States and ensure targeted solutions. This will build on successful examples like the GNSBI initiative.

1.3 CFP Evaluation

Stelios Mitolidis invited ACs to share key points for the CFP evaluation. He reminded participants that the public consultation is open until 21 April.

Breckling noted the CFP's success, particularly in stock recovery in regions like the North Sea and North Western Waters. He emphasized two key areas for the evaluation: first, ecosystem-based management should include predator management, referring to the growing impact of species like seals and cormorants; second, conservation targets, such as those under the NRL, require close alignment with the CFP. He welcomed the Commission's work on guidance for mapping, monitoring, and assessment, stressing the importance of ensuring strong links between the CFP and NRL going forward.

Regarding funding, **Mitolidis** referenced the Commission's communication on the new **MF** issued on 12 February. Stakeholders are encouraged to submit input to the public consultation by 6 May.

On the **Nature Restoration Law**, he reminded that Member States must submit their national plans by August 2026. The Commission has provided guidelines, and all stakeholder should be engaged in this process.

Mitolidis also outlined ongoing work on evaluations of the **EMFF and EMFAF**, with publications expected before summer 2025. Work is advancing on an **Article 17 (vademecum on fishing rights)**, with the Commission seeking stakeholder input and planning to share guidance and successful examples. Finally, the Commission will soon publish results from the **LO study**.

2 Dialogue with DG MARE on EU Fisheries External Action (update on SFPAs)

Commissioner Kadis has been tasked with developing a new strategic approach for the EU's external fisheries action.

Given the rapidly changing global context, including increasing ocean pressures, geopolitical instability, and the rise of IUU fishing, a new and coherent strategy is crucial. The EU must strengthen international governance, align with global commitments (i.e., SDGs, the High Seas Treaty), and leverage its market power to promote sustainability and a level playing field.

Key pillars of the strategy will be:

- Shared stock management with third countries

- Active participation in Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs)
- Enhanced enforcement against IUU fishing
- New SFPAs
- Sustainable and traceable seafood imports

A key pillar of the EU's external fisheries strategy is ensuring a level playing field, both in international fisheries management and trade. This means raising global standards through RFMOs, SFPAs, and joint stock agreements, ensuring that all fleets (including non-EU ones) adhere to sustainable practices. Simultaneously, the EU needs to ensure that imported seafood meets the same environmental and social standards as domestic products, using its market power to drive compliance beyond its borders.

The **Commission invited ACs to reflect** on:

- How can the EU enhance environmental sustainability via RFMOs, climate action, and the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ)?
- What steps can ensure strong labour standards across EU and non-EU fleets?
- How should the EU implement import bans on products linked to forced labour?
- How can economic sustainability in aquatic value chains be secured, and at which level (multilateral, bilateral, autonomous)?
- How can the EU reinforce its global leadership against IUU fishing and improve fisheries control?
- How can regional strategies be tailored to align with EU interests and maximise the impact of EU instruments?
- What role can next-generation bilateral SFPAs play in advancing sustainability, resilience, and fair access?

3 Closing remarks

The Commission informed ACs that an upcoming **workshop** will focus on **funding opportunities**, particularly through the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture (EIP-AGRI). It will highlight how EMFAF can support research, innovation, and the energy transition in fisheries, aquaculture, and maritime sectors, emphasizing public funding as a driver of bottom-up, collaborative projects. Further details will be shared shortly.

The **next inter-AC meeting is scheduled for Autumn 2025**.