



VIRGINIJUS SINKEVIČIUS
Commissioner for Environment
Oceans and Fisheries

Brussels, 23 July 2020
Ref. Ares(2020)3443046

Mr Pim Visser
President
European Association of Fish Producers Organisations
H. Baelskai 20
8400 Oostende
BELGIUM

Dear Mr Visser,

Thank you for your letter of 3 June 2020 in which you express your concerns about the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. As I said on various occasions over the last weeks, I truly think that it is in fishermen's and women's own interest.

The aims of the new Strategy is to protect and conserve marine biodiversity as a basis for the sustainable provision of the EU seas' functions and services, including fisheries. All related targets are underpinned by sound scientific evidence and I am confident that they are achievable and fully compatible with the sustainable growth objectives enshrined in the European Green Deal, if we all work together and do an effort to ensure their effective implementation.

The ultimate goal of the Strategy is that, by 2050, all marine ecosystems are healthy, resilient and able to deliver the ecosystem services on which we, and first of all fishermen and women, so strongly depend. I truly regret that you read the Strategy as painting the fisheries sector in a negative way, as it was actually meant to recognise the crucial role and efforts of that sector in preserving marine biodiversity and ecosystems, proposing a number of measures to ensure a sustainable use of marine living resources.

There have been significant and clear improvements in lowering the pressure from fishing in the northeast Atlantic and in increasing biomass, and I continue to emphasise this in all my public and non-public interventions, praising fishermen and women for their considerable efforts, which allowed this progress to be happen. However, we cannot deny that challenges remain. Some stocks continue to be overfished and/or are outside of the safe biological limits, and it is clear that a stronger effort is needed to bring these stocks to sustainable levels. For the Mediterranean and Black Seas, vigorous conservation efforts also clearly need to continue. For this, the Common Fisheries Policy, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive,

and the Habitats and Birds Directives have a crucial role to play. We count on the full commitment of the EU Member States and stakeholders to implement concrete measures to achieve their full implementation.

I acknowledge your concerns related to the proposed increase of marine protected areas (MPAs) and other area-based effective conservation measures (OECMs) to cover 30% of our seas by 2030. However, many studies¹ demonstrate that effectively managed MPAs can actually deliver important socio-economic benefits – both directly, for example through conservation-oriented employment and capacity-building; and indirectly, by generating a spill-over effect that increases the biomass of commercially exploited species, by sequestering organic and inorganic carbon and reducing coastal erosion and thus contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation, by increasing ecosystem resilience to invasive species or global warming, by trapping or diluting pollutants such as excess nutrients, by boosting sustainable touristic and recreational activities, or by becoming invaluable spots for research and technological innovation. I am convinced that a healthy marine ecosystem is in fact the basis for a sustainable and thriving Blue Economy, and thus the basis for fishermen's and women's important economic activities, which provide us day by day with healthy food from the sea.

Protecting at least 30% of the sea in the EU may sound ambitious but I think it is a sensible approach. These areas are our long-term insurance policy. The additional MPAs needed to bridge the gap between the current designations and the 30% target would continue to fall into different categories, ranging from fully protected areas with no take zones, to multiple-use areas, as defined by the IUCN Guidelines on MPA management.

Within this context, the strict protection to be afforded to areas of very high biodiversity value does not necessarily mean that those areas will not be accessible to humans, but rather that the natural processes should remain essentially undisturbed to respect the areas' ecological requirements. Today, less than 1% of marine areas are strictly protected in the EU, although they deliver the highest ecological benefits². We need to do better to protect these areas.

In this spirit, the Strategy proposes at least one third of protected areas – representing 10% of EU seas – to be strictly protected.

Next to MPAs, OECMs may also contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation purposes. Such measures can be cost-effective tools, more flexible in space and time, and more directly linked to the interests of the fisheries sectors. By protecting fish spawning and nursery grounds, for example, other vulnerable habitats and species can be protected. To get the maximum benefit from these OECMs, they, too, should follow scientific advice and complement, rather than substitute, the network of protected areas.

With regards to bottom-contacting gears, we propose a commitment to ensure the integrity of the seabed and the good status of the multitude of habitats it hosts, which, as stated above, is crucial not only for our marine biodiversity goals but also for our livelihoods. Bottom

¹ - Russi D., Pantzar M., Kettunen M., Gitti G., Mutafoglu K., Kotulak M. & ten Brink P. (2016). Socio-Economic Benefits of the EU Marine Protected Areas. Report prepared by the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) for DG Environment

<https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/marine/docs/Socio%20-Economic%20Benefits%20of%20EU%20MPAs.pdf>

- Study on the economic benefits of marine protected areas from 2018. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/85897a77-b0c7-11e8-99ee-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

² Sala and Giakoumi 2018. No-take marine reserves are the most effective protected areas in the ocean. ICES Journal of Marine Science, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsx059>

trawling is indeed identified as a key threat to those ecosystems and needs to be tackled effectively if we want to protect them and allow them to recover. The negative impacts of unsustainable fishing practices on sensitive species and habitats, without neglecting of course the impacts of other activities damaging the seabed, will have to be reduced substantially in order to achieve good environmental status, as defined in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and to achieve the goals of our nature legislation. Action based on science to reduce bottom trawling pressure is most urgently needed also within Marine Protected Areas such as those designated under the Natura 2000 network, so that they can fulfil their conservation objectives.

Let me assure you that the new Strategy does not denigrate seafood products and the fishing sector as you mention. On the contrary, we are deeply engaged in our common challenge to ensure long-term sustainable production of healthy food for the EU population, while reducing human impact on the marine ecosystems and decreasing our carbon footprint. And I am truly committed to reach out and discuss the issues and concerns you raise with you and the fishermen and women you represent. Without them, there will not be any biodiversity.

Finally, I would like to stress that the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly not been used as an excuse to justify more stringent measures. The pandemic makes the adoption and the implementation of the Strategy even more urgent and pertinent, given the need for more resilient food systems and clear links between nature destruction and overexploitation of natural resources by humans and the increased risk of outbreaks of zoonotic diseases.

I look very much forward to further discussion with you how we can implement the Biodiversity Strategy, and I would like to reassure you that I am truly committed to fully involve the fisheries sector in this process, whose key importance I have always acknowledged and whose contribution to our food security and to more sustainable fisheries I sincerely respect.

Yours faithfully,



Virginijus Sinkevičius

c.c.: Timmermans, F.,
ENV; Calleja, D., Planas L., Doppelhammer M., Delgado H., Leiner S.,
D’Cunha, K., Papoulias F., Pertierra JP., Pirodda, F., Cheilari, A.

MARE; Vitcheva, Ch.