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NWWAC ADVICE

On the Communication from the Commission
"Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries"
COM(2023) 102 final

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1. Background

On 21 February 2023, the European Commission released a fisheries policies package – the CFP package – including four communications outlining measures to improve the sustainability and resilience of the EU's fisheries and aquaculture sector: a Communication on the Energy Transition of the EU Fisheries and Aquaculture sector; an Action Plan to protect and restore marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries; a Communication on the common fisheries policy today and tomorrow and a Report on the Common Market Organisation for fishery and aquaculture products.

The Commission was legally due to report on the functioning of the Common Fisheries Policy and the Common Market Organisation by the end of 2022 whereas the Action Plan was foreseen in the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 for 2021. As the energy crisis and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia led the EU to rethink its energy consumption and its energy dependency, the Commission also proposed an Initiative on the Energy transition of the fisheries and aquaculture sector. Given the concurrence of these elements, the European Commission decided to release these in a package.

Following the publication of this package, the North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) established a dedicated Focus Group to analyse its content and develop recommendations on the propositions made by the Commission.

The present advice constitutes one of the deliverables of the Focus Group and addresses the Commission and the NWW Member States on the elements included in the Action Plan to protect and restore marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries, hereafter Marine Action Plan. The advice will also take into account the input provided by the NWWAC to the targeted consultation on the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems from December 2021.

2. General remarks

Before addressing the paragraphs and corresponding actions of the Marine Action Plan, the NWWAC wishes to make a few general remarks.

- The NWWAC feels that further clarification is needed on the Commission's intention regarding the implementation of the Plan (e.g. regarding bottom fishing). In particular, the NWWAC

would appreciate if the Commission could clarify the legally binding aspects of the Plan and how the Plan will be articulated in relation to other legislation (Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Nature Restoration Law, Farm to Fork Strategy, Water Directive, etc.).

- Several deadlines are set in the Action Plan, especially in relation to the actions expected by the Member States in order to implement the Plan. However, it is the NWWAC's view that several of these deadlines seem extremely tight given the complexity of the issues to be resolved and of the actions to be taken. The NWWAC calls for realistic deadlines that take into account the available capacity and resources of Member States' administrations and that allow for appropriate consultation of stakeholders and of Advisory Councils in particular, in the context of the regionalisation process.

- The NWWAC stresses the need for the Action Plan to ensure balance between reaching conservation objectives, socio-economic aspects and food security considerations. Indeed, the Action Plan seems to be characterised by a lack of consistency between the EU food policy ambitions and its conservation objectives, leaving the key role of fisheries in terms of food security and socio-economic benefits in the background. While the sector remains strongly committed to meeting environmental objectives to ensure fishing activities become more sustainable, it also needs to remain workable and profitable to ensure it can keep providing sustainable and healthy animal-source protein to EU citizens. In this regard, the NWWAC also highlights the inconsistency between the EU's ambitions to strengthen its food self-sufficiency and the introduction of measures that it would be incapable of demanding and controlling when applied to imported products.

- The Action Plan should ensure the application of a holistic approach to marine ecosystems management, taking into consideration all sources of disturbance to the environment and/or species. The maritime space is used by many different sectors and subject to various anthropogenic impacts (submarine cables, aggregate extraction, dredging-immersion, concrete coastline, pollution, recreational fishing, etc.). The main activities identified in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive causing a physical loss of marine habitat are coastal artificialization, solid waste disposal and marine renewable energy. These sectors must therefore be considered, evaluated and treated in the Action Plan in the same way as fishing. Thus, risk analysis of these activities must be carried out leading to measures which limit their impact on sensitive habitats. Pollution from land must also be integrated into an analysis of the pressures on sensitive habitats and species.

- The NWWAC also calls for the Action Plan to respect and implement the principle of regionalisation. Tailored sea basin management strategies should be prioritised and developed with the participation of local stakeholders to ensure that the proposed measures are useful and efficient.

- The NWWAC would like to remind DG MARE and the Member States that several issues in this Action Plan have already been addressed by the AC in previous pieces of advice. This is likely the same situation for other ACs. The NWWAC would appreciate knowing if and how these have been reflected in the Plan and remains available to share its previous recommendations again with the Commission and the MS where needed for further discussions.

- To conclude, the NWWAC points out that putting funding in place is fundamental to support the implementation of the ambitious set of actions foreseen and to ensure the resiliency of the fishing sector. However, the Plan is lacking clear funding possibilities and provision of very large financial resources, which are especially required to ensure a just transition for the fisheries sector. Investments in terms of funding and research & development are fundamental as well as more flexibility in existing funding mechanisms, to allocate funding across Member States more efficiently.

3. Making fishing practices more sustainable

a. Improving fishing selectivity and reduce the impact of fisheries on sensitive species

In the Action Plan, the Commission calls on Member Staes to develop **threshold values for the maximum allowable mortality rate from incidental catches** of the species selected by the MS as part of the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) by the end of 2023. The NWWAC recommends that where definitions of these threshold values exist in directives already in force (such as the MSFD) or resulting from their implementation by the MS, they must be prioritised to ensure policy consistency. Moreover, the NWWAC would like to raise the importance of ensuring coherence between the MSFD and the CFP, which already includes the MSY objective.
Proposed threshold values must be drawn up by scientists, co-experimented by fishers and then discussed with other relevant stakeholders, to ensure that precise and achievable objectives are set and agreed with the resource users. The criteria Member States will use to define species needing protection will also have to be clarified with stakeholders.
The NWWAC notes that the deadline set by the Commission might be too tight, as these thresholds are difficult to define and assess in a context of uncertainty in terms of capacity and quality of scientific expertise in the context of climate change: the challenge lies primarily in precise knowledge of the populations of the species concerned, and there are considerable gaps in the availability of indicators for analysing the situation in order to ensure conservation.

Regarding the action foreseen to **minimise bycatch of sensitive species**, the NWWAC agrees that certain species will be identified as needing extra or exceptional protection. Overall, there are already many examples of prohibited species and gear attachments introduced to protect species of concern. This can be achieved in conjunction with the fishing industry to achieve the most effective method while maintaining the fishery in question profitable and sustainable over time.

- The NWWAC would like to refer to the advice submitted in December 2020 on **incidental cetaceans bycatch** in the NWW. The advice mentions a lack of specific data on cetaceans

movements in the North Western Waters and proposes a set of recommendations in this regard. In particular, the advice strongly recommended "*that increased scientific research on the populations of not only common dolphins, but also PET species, be carried out in the North Western Waters, including the impact of climate change, pollution etc.*". The NWWAC notes incidental dolphin bycatch is a societal and divisive issue. It is important that legislators, stakeholders and civil society discuss and agree on shared management goals for cetacean populations in the NWW. In particular, the good status of a specific population should be defined.

- Regarding **skates and rays species** in the NWW, the NWWAC issued advice on best practice measures for their management in April 2021. This opinion includes a list of innovative fishing gears/techniques that could be tested in areas other than the Celtic Sea to better protect ray species, such as the raised fishing line trawl to reduce catches. Another example is the Benthos Release Panel (BRP) in combination with led, as tested through the Combituig project (EMFF project by ILVO, Belgium).
- In the case of the threatened and strictly protected **European sturgeon** (*Acipenser sturio*), experience shows that the fish, whether accidentally trapped in a net or in a bottom trawl, is particularly resistant to capture. Although captures are rare, the individuals are alive when they are brought up and can be released in good conditions in the vast majority of cases (99%). The introduction of restrictive measures for the fleets will not only arouse the incomprehension of the profession, but will also interrupt the series of declarative data that only they are able to produce and weaken the monitoring of the state of the sturgeon population.
- While the Action Plan rightly emphasises the urgent need to reduce the impact of the many factors that cause mortality in **European eels**, it does not recognise that these are also unrelated to fishing and therefore does not address them. They include reduction of functional habitats, hindrance to free movement, pollution, modification of marine currents, predation by birds and more abundant exotic species, artificialization of environments, etc. The factors have already been addressed to the Commission in the NSAC/NWWAC Advice on European eel management from April 2022 that provides specific recommendations.

The NWWAC would also like to point out that there are bycatches of commercial species that are not targeted but contribute to vessel turnover. For the NWW, these are regulated by article 5 of EU Regulation 2019/472. A distinction should be made in any communication on the subject.

In relation to measures against the loss and discarding of fishing gear and **fishing related marine litter**, the NWWAC recommends reviewing the recommendations included in the Multi-AC Advice on the implementation of the Single Use Plastics Directive and operational aspects of the Fishing for Litter Scheme from July 2020. Research towards biodegradable and compostable yarns and alternative to plastics should be supported. For example, the TEFIBIO project, which aimed to design and test biodegradable trammel nets, ended this month with encouraging results. The NWWAC would like to point out the current negotiations towards an international legally binding instrument on plastic

pollution, including in the marine environment conducted in the framework of the United Nations that are likely to address the issue of marine plastic pollution in a holistic manner.

In the Action Plan, the Commission is calling on the Member States to present and implement **additional measures to boost selectivity**, starting with the fish stocks with the highest expected biological gains. The NWWAC recommends to first assess the results of the current technical measures in place and their effectiveness prior to considering additional measures, especially in relation to selectivity. In the past, the NWWAC has advised to prioritise measures which not only minimise the amount of unwanted catches (and thus the risk to choke a fishery), but also help the relevant stocks recover to mitigate chokes in the longer-term. Members strongly believe that it is crucial to identify those measures which are most effective at allowing small fish to escape alive. Accordingly, evaluations should continue regarding the effectiveness of these measures to protect a stock from being fished unsustainably and ensuring survivability of fish escaping the net.

In this context, the obligation to land all catches as stated in article 15 of the CFP should be reviewed to allow for the evolving nature of technical measures and to give the fleet the opportunity to develop the measures required to reduce unwanted catches.

The NWWAC wishes to highlight the complexity of the **technical measures** framework in the NWW, which is often generating confusion and lack of coherence between regulations. A clear example in this regard is the clash between the Technical Measures Regulation and the CFP in terms of catch compositions. It is vital that the Commission's reporting exercise on the implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation planned for 2024 addresses the existing conflicts and implementation uncertainties.

The NWWAC would like to refer to page 3 of its response to the targeted consultation on the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems from December 2021, which includes an extensive list of projects on **innovations in fishing gears and techniques** that should be taken into account to improve selectivity. That list should be integrated with the following:

- The REJEMCELEC project aimed to improve the selectivity of bottom trawls in the western Channel and the Celtic Sea and has produced some very encouraging results. These include the use of T90 mesh panels on the back of the trawl as an alternative to a square mesh panel. These devices show better results on the escapement of horse mackerel, mackerel and small whiting.
- The SelecTM project aimed to assess the effectiveness of the regulatory measures in force since 2019 in the Celtic Sea.
- The SELUX project aimed to evaluate the ability of light to improve the effectiveness of the selective devices used by trawlers in the Eastern Channel and Southern North Sea and produced very encouraging results, particularly for whiting.

It is essential that appropriate financial resources are made available to carry out experiments on vessels. The cost of innovation cannot be borne by the industry alone. The loss of revenue from experiments at sea should be compensated.

In relation to the Commission's call to Member States to **create new and effectively manage all MPAs** by 2030, ensuring strict protection of important fish spawning and nursery areas, the NWWAC refers again to the specific recommendations made in its response to the targeted consultation on the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems from December 2021.
Overall, the NWWAC wishes to highlight that each site will require its own individual management plan to protect the different aspects of the habitat or species for which the site will have been assigned. Prior to measures adoption and implementation, it is important to define the methods for achieving the objectives set. A solid baseline of scientific data should also be obtained for the species or habitats to be protected. Marine habitats to be protected can differ in sensitivity, resilience potential and ecological values and as such, applicable rules and measures should be adapted to these specificities. It is also important to consider that while nursery and spawning areas have been well identified, their location and distribution can also change with the seasons. Therefore, when necessary and depending on the species in consideration, strict protection should be limited in time.
The NWWAC notes that the need to create new MPAs has not the same urgency in all MS and the effective management of existing MPAs should be prioritised. Indeed, many Member States in the NWW region already have a high percentage of MPAs in their waters and have already reached 30% protection[1]. The AC FishMap developed by the NWWAC gives a clear picture of the spatial distribution of MPAs in the NWW.

Opportunities for synergy between fisheries management efforts and conservation purposes should be further explored. For example, other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) can complement MPAs and contribute to ecologically representative and effectively managed MPAs systems integrated into broader governance systems such as marine spatial planning. OECMs allow for a variety of sustainable use sectors to contribute to meeting conservation targets through their own area-based management initiatives. This is a very valuable opportunity whose implementation should be kept as flexible as possible, depending on the area specificities. Recognising OECMs as part of conservation targets also makes marine protection a multi-sectoral effort and explicitly acknowledges the needs of people (e.g., food security, income generation, livelihoods, cultural values). As a reminder, as already adopted in 2018 by the Convention on Biological Diversity and its members, including the European Commission and EU Member States, the new version of the CBD considers that the 30% target for protected areas concerns both MPAs and OECMs.
As mentioned in the Action Plan, in 2023 the Commission will ask the STECF to provide advice on evaluating the **optimum sizes** of fish to be caught in fishing gear, in order to obtain the highest long-term yield. The NWWAC would like to ask for clarification on the use of the terms 'optimum sizes of fish' and 'highest long-term yield'. The NWWAC wonders if the Commission is introducing new concepts and asks what the relation would be between "highest long-term yield" and MSY. Furthermore, the assessments will have to be carried out at the right level (flag, trade, etc.) and integrate the multi-species dimension of the fleets by jointly analysing the exploitation diagrams of

[1] France, Germany and Belgium according to the European Environmental Agency : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ENV_BIO1__custom_6947472/default/map?lang=en

the main species caught, but also other selectivity indicators and the cause of discards and be carried out within an appropriate governance framework.

Referring to the 2018 discussions on the Technical Measures Regulation, the NWWAC recalls that the optimal size (L_{opt}) can only be a non-binding indicator of selectivity performance and not a targeted objective. Indeed, in the report PLEN-18-01, STECF notes that in order to achieve L_{opt}, "*minimal legal lengths or mesh sizes should be dramatically increased for most stocks. In the case of the North Sea cod for instance, the theoretical value of the optimal length at first catch is equal to 72 cm*". STECF also notes that in mixed fisheries "*there is no unique selection pattern which could ensure fishing each species according to its own optimal length* L_{opt}".

Where minimum sizes are a standard for most species, for species such as skates and rays often a maximum size is presented as an option which would create a narrow window where the fish could be targeted. This would create a roadblock in the growth pattern of the species concerned as the fish will be targeted as close as possible to the maximum allowable size, preventing more individuals from reaching full maturity than if the catch was a cross section of size ranges. The NWWAC argues that the size of 1st reproduction may be more useful for certain species.

To conclude, the NWWAC notes that the Commission will prepare the adoption of implementing rules under the Technical Measures Regulation to improve the selectivity of fishing gears and establish rules on bird-scaring lines and weighted lines in all sea basins. It is vital that regional/local specificities are taken into account to ensure a smooth adoption of these implementing rules in local contexts. Previous discussion and consultation with local stakeholders and professionals are key to this process.

b. Reducing the impact of fishing on the seabed

First of all, the NWWAC would require from the Commission further clarifications on the so-called ban of bottom-fishing in all MPAs. Indeed, although the Action Plan is not a binding instrument per se, the intention of the Commission in the text seem to go towards a ban on bottom-fishing in all MPAs. We strongly recommend that an assessment of the proven risks of using deep-water fishing gear in Natura 2000 areas for conservation purposes be carried out in order to really determine when an activity is incompatible with an ecological issue. On the other hand, several interventions of the Commission, notably in front of the Member of the European Parliament Committee on Fisheries, have led to understand that these measures are only a first step to foster dialogue with the Member States of the seabed. The NWWAC would appreciate having a clearer understanding of the Commission's intentions on the matter especially regarding the conclusions of the Council[2] on the subject. The legal vacuum surrounding the Community and international definition of marine protected areas needs to be filled. On one hand, there is the idea that MPAs can only correspond to the categories defined by the IUCN. where only certain fishing activities are compatible. On the other, the objectives of the Habitats, Fauna and Flora and Birds Directives, on which the Natura 2000 network is based, are based on a case-by-case assessment of impacts to restore or maintain habitats and species in favourable conditions.

[2] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11053-2023-INIT/en/pdf

Secondly, since regionalisation is at the core of the CFP, the NWWAC questions the establishment of an EU-wide measure that does not take into consideration the specificities of each sea basin. Therefore, the NWWAC recommends that the management plans for each individual MPA be designed to protect the ecosystem and habitats concerned and that restrictions on mobile bottom fishing are applied only where scientific evidence requires this and that the socio-economic impacts have been measured.

Each area, including peripheral grounds, must be investigated individually to understand its peculiarities (resilience and status of habitat, type and intensity of fishing activities) and needs to be considered both in terms of conservation and socio-economic impacts. Conservation measures should be specific to the designation of each site and solutions for the issues identified should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The AC would also like to highlight that the integrity of sediments can also be impacted by other factors than bottom mobile fishing, such as heavy storms or the hydrodynamics of the environment. The Channel, for example, is considered to be a mega tidal sea that is strongly influenced by the tides, and whose hydrodynamic regime strongly structures its ecosystems.

The possibility of having an indiscriminate ban on mobile gear in contact with the seabed in MPAs raises important questions that need to be addressed. The necessary adaptations and rebalancing to compensate for the loss of areas would need to be considered first, as the fishing and coastal communities and the whole seafood supply chair would be impacted severely. The benefits of using mobile bottom fishing gear for food security cannot be ignored, as European food production must remain resilient to any future food crisis. The benefits of the use of mobile bottom fishing gear for food production cannot be disregarded. Moreover, such a ban would be affecting those fisheries that are already managed sustainably. For example, fishing for kelp in northern Brittany would be banned because it takes place in an MPA, despite it being regulated in a sustainable way. Another example would be scallop dredging in the Bay of Saint-Brieuc, which is regularly cited as an example of sustainable fishing.

The AC wishes to mention work by ILVO on estimating impact on the seabed by the Belgian fleet[3]. In particular, ILVO has been looking at various approaches and indicators to estimate the status of benthic state and the risk of decreasing its quality. The main objective is to find an appropriate approach to evaluate and manage sea bottom impact for the Belgian fishery. Such an approach could be useful and relevant for application in other areas as well.

Overall, the NWWAC believes that a systematic reduction in the use of mobile bottom gears, which account for a quarter of total EU landings, would result in the European Union becoming dependent on imports from third countries for the supply of seafood products.

[3] Presentation made by Hans Polet, ILVO, at NWWAC Horizontal Working Group meeting on 4 July available here: https://www.nwwac.org/listing/nwwac-horizontal-working-group.3942.html

Moreover, the AC wishes to raise attention on a new study on bottom trawling published on the ICES Journal of Marine Science[4]. The authors acknowledge the environmental impacts of bottom trawling, but point out that, when managed sustainably, these are far less than those of most animal-based foods, for example in terms of water use, antibiotic use and nutrient release. Therefore, while a ban on bottom trawling may reduce impacts on the seabed, it could actually increase negative impacts on the global environment, as trawled food would be replaced by land-based food or aquaculture species. The study reports that negative environmental impacts of bottom trawling have been reduced by maintaining stocks at high abundance with low fishing mortality rates through technical measures that incentivise bycatch avoidance and reduce or eliminate bottom contact. These proven management measures and voluntary actions are adaptable to a range of local conditions.

In this regard, it is also important to acknowledge that the latest innovations in fishing (for example the Belgian 'Vistools' technology) make it possible to monitor very specifically on which seabed types fishing is taking place. This allows fishers to avoid sensitive areas at the level of very small grids. A beam trawl vessel for example, has a maximum towing space of 2 x 12 meters, which allows it to avoid sensitive areas in a very detailed way.

The NWWAC recommends that the Commission first evaluates the measures that have been taken for mobile bottom fishing, in particular bottom trawling. Several scientific programs and projects have been carried out in collaboration with the sector and this work should not be discarded. Smart trawl doors and smart footropes are a couple of examples in support to this statement. Such research should continue towards limiting the impact on the seabed. However, legal uncertainty does not encourage investment on new technologies.

Referring to the Commission's call to the Member States to finalise by mid-2023 the adoption of threshold values for the reduction in the impact of fishing on sensitive species or on the loss of seabed area, the NWWAC believes that a certain amount of vigilance is required. These thresholds are difficult to define, to evaluate in a context of uncertainty in terms of capacity and quality (accuracy and period of validity) of scientific expertise in the context of climate change, to implement and to monitor, and will have very significant consequences in the future.

We note that the European Commission has recently proposed a new target to place 10% of the EU seabed in "reference areas" free from human pressure in order to assess their natural variability. In this respect, the AC is concerned about the articulation with the MSFD and Commission Decision 2017/848 establishing criteria and methodological standards for the GES of marine waters, which are already struggling to operate since their adoption. We strongly recommend revising the MSFD objectives and associated descriptors in order to qualitatively assess by habitat the degree of pressure acceptable to maintain it in GES, before progressing towards the closure of 10% of EU waters.

[4] Hilborn, R., et al. "Evaluating the sustainability and environmental impacts of trawling compared to other food production systems." *ICES Journal of Marine Science* (2023): fsad115.

4. Securing a fair and just transition for all

The Commission considers that the socio-economic impacts from the implementation of the Action Plan will potentially be significant in the short term but can be absorbed through conversion or redeployment to other areas. The NWWAC recommends that an impact analysis of the proposed actions is carried out, to ensure that aspects such as the quota and effort management rules and the impact on markets are properly addressed.

The members of the NWWAC seeks clarification on how the Commission sees recreational fishing as an economic diversification opportunity for the sector, given that it is not a professional activity that generates income for fishers. In addition, an explanation of what is meant by "*well-managed recreational fisheries*" on page 14 of the action plan would be appreciated.

The NWWAC wishes to emphasise that the conversion of fishing businesses to other activities, particularly tourism and recreational fishing, cannot be envisaged without considering the socio-economic consequences for the fishing industry as a whole and for the territories and coastal communities concerned. Once again, a socio-economic assessment of the consequences of the proposed measures for both the fishing industry and coastal communities seems a necessary prerequisite in order to determine the relevance and appropriateness of such conversion proposals.

In addition, an incentive to switch from commercial fishing to tourism could potentially increase the number of touristic uses and visits to coastal areas, particularly in MPAs. Therefore, the environmental costs and benefits of such a conversion need to be assessed in order to avoid potential degradation of habitats and species in MPAs due to excessive numbers of tourists.

NWWAC members would like to recall that a sustainable European fishing sector produces a low carbon, high-value protein for consumers, compared to other animal protein producing sectors, and highlight the importance of promoting seafood as part of sustainable, climate-neutral food consumption. There has also been a steady downward trend in fuel consumption and emissions in the European fisheries sector since 1990, with a reduction of more than 50% in emissions observed in the European fisheries sector, a reduction close to the target of 55% 10 years ahead of the 2030 deadline[5]. However, the transition to alternative fuels will in time become necessary and the sector needs to be part of the solution.

The fishing industry can only make this transition when an alternative option becomes available at a commercially viable level. Both fishing gears and techniques have evolved over millennia and will continue to evolve into the future. To make any sudden changes at one point in time will require extensive research and investment, as well as the removal of regulatory obstacles, to maintain a viable industry and maintain food supplies.

[5] Although the reduction in the European fleet accounts for part of the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, this adjustment of the production tool has also resulted in an improvement in the energy efficiency of vessels and an increase in fishing yields (also linked to a general increase in the biomass exploited), which together have led to a reduction in energy intensity.

Furthermore, the action plan does not mention any new financial resources to be dedicated to its implementation to ensure a just transition.

The sector should be fully supported in making this transition. It is important that the fisheries sector receives adequate funding to ensure that its needs are examined in the developments of these new technologies, while bearing in mind the risk of a withdrawal of banks from supporting investment in the context of the implementation of the Taxonomy regulation.

The European Commission has been investing in research in hydrogen technology and has funded 108 projects related to this under the Horizon 2020 programme. However, only a few were related to the maritime sector and even fewer to the fishing sector.

In the case of a shift towards alternative fuels, several logistic issues need to be considered in relation to marketing, ports equipment (charging stations, LNG storage, etc.), maintenance and crew training. EU fishing companies are continually devising and implementing creative solutions to save energy. However, the current technologies are still not a direct alternative to fossil fuels, and while the industry is trying to reduce its environmental impact by improving engine and gear efficiency, more knowledge is needed regarding technological possibilities to have a real breakthrough technology adapted to the size and diversity of fishing vessels.

Finally, the possibility of unintended adverse consequences of these alternative gears should not be overlooked.

The NWWAC will specifically address fisheries decarbonisation and energy transition through its Focus Group Climate & Environment, which will review and produce advice on the related Communication from the Commission.

5. Strengthening the knowledge base and research and innovation

The NWWAC agrees with the Commission that more research and data collection is needed to build knowledge on the status of species and habitats and on the impacts from fisheries and other activities. The transition to more selective and environmentally less damaging fishing practices requires a systematic assessment of the costs and benefits to ensure a just transition for the fisheries sector.

To develop solutions and incentives to reduce the environmental impacts of fishing, it is vital that the EU provides adequate funding for innovation, at the level of scientific institutes, research centres and businesses. The EU must also provide funding for technology transfer from research to application on ships. These funds should be clearly earmarked for this purpose and, above all, accessible to the vessels concerned. Administrative procedures between Member States and final beneficiaries to allocate funding should be simplified.

The NWWAC notes that the Commission calls on MS to define objectives and specific data needs for each sea basin by the end of 2023, to monitor the impact of fishing on ecosystems and carbon sequestration, and then allocating sufficient funds for these activities. The NWWAC reiterates in this occasion as well that the deadline is far too restrictive and unrealistic for any meaningful work to take place. Moreover, the AC advises that sea basins might be too large as reference areas for effective

governance in this regard and recommends that MS take into account smaller areas and their characteristics. For example, in the NWW, difference should be made for the Celtic Sea, the West of Scotland, the Irish Sea and the Channel.

The NWWAC acknowledges that the Commission will start developing a modelling tool to incorporate the concept of "natural capital" in economic decisions by the end of 2023. In this regard, it is important to be aware of the complexity of calculating the services provided by ecosystems and ensure that people are not excluded from the benefits.

The NWWAC welcomes the initiative by the Commission to launch a study quantifying the EU's seabed carbon storage capacity and possible impacts of bottom fishing activities on this capacity, but notes that there is no precise mapping of carbon stocks in these sediments, which is a prerequisite. The Commission itself acknowledges that there is a lack of scientific knowledge to estimate the effects of trawling on the remineralisation of organic carbon in sediments. An initiative of this kind must therefore first aim to finance the establishment of a precise map of organic and inorganic carbon stocks in European seabed sediments and its regular updating. The study should be duly subject to peer-review.

6. Monitoring and enforcement

Regarding the Commission's proposal that Member States improve fisheries monitoring, the NWWAC would like to point out that there is already a heavy burden of monitoring in European fisheries and that any use of REM should only be applied in extreme circumstances.

Fishery products being imported from outside of the European Union should be weighted in line with European control and enforcement measures. If these products do not comply with the high standards of the European Union, then the European fishing industry is at an economic disadvantage.

Overall, these topics will be discussed addressed by the NWWAC Focus Group on Control, Enforcement and Compliance, which will also review the revised Fisheries Control Regulation, soon to be adopted, and prepare advice where necessary.

7. Improving governance, stakeholder involvement and outreach

The Plan mentions that the Commission calls on Member States to prepare and publish roadmaps outlining all the measures needed by the end of March 2024, including timelines for their adoption and proposals to improve coordination between national authorities and stakeholders. The NWWAC wishes to highlight that the content of the Action Plan needs to be reviewed and agreed with stakeholders before these roadmaps are prepared to ensure they lead towards sustainable activities and avoid any one-size-fits-all measure. Any further measure or regulation proposed to support the Action Plan should be backed by a full socio-economic impact assessment of the effects on the fishing fleets to minimise or avoid any further loses.

Regarding the joint special group for MS to be established in 2023, the NWWAC refers to the letter sent on 6 June on the matter and appreciates the information received recently regarding a first meeting scheduled on 6 October.

Overall, sound and effective legislation can only emerge as a result of synergies from continuous engagement and contact with stakeholders. ACs are best placed for such synergies to occur and for giving a balanced advice based on compromise, given their diverse composition. Close communication and cooperation between the ACs, the Commission and the Regional Member States Group is essential to optimise the efficiency of the consultation process, the exchange of ideas and the production of advice. It is crucial that transparency is provided on the decision-making process. In this regard, having an effective advice feedback procedure involving the Commission and the Member States Regional Groups would help ensuring constructive collaboration and maintain members' interest and participation under the regionalisation principle.

The NWWAC also recommends that further cooperation is fostered between technical fisheries representatives of the regional groups with the technical environmental counterparts. This collaboration should be extended to include the ACs, who, in addition, need to be enabled to exchange views directly with representatives from DG ENV in conjunction with the relevant technical representatives from DG MARE.