

GREEN DEAL: HUGE AMBITION, LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

The Dutch fishing sector is facing no shortage of challenges – both regulatory and environmental.

Quentin Bates



'A tiny rise in temperature has vast effects. Cod are moving north, 12 kilometres every year, and plaice are moving 3.5 metres deeper every ten years,' said Pim Visser, chief executive of Dutch industry association VisNed.

'We need to focus on what's important, which isn't supertrawlers fishing in MPAs.'

He added that in Dutch waters gurnards and mullets are now seen all year round, and there is more cuttlefish at certain times of the year.



The Dutch fleet is facing a range of natural, environmental and political challenges

'But these are by-catch. The industry's real economic drivers are sole and plaice. Sole catches have been good. Not super, but good. After a three-month downturn we are seeing prices for plaice recovering, but at a lower level. The restaurant species – turbot and brill – are much cheaper than before the Covid crisis, plus we have a problem with the brown shrimp as processing in Morocco is down to 25% capacity due to social distancing.'

He commented that Morocco has taken extremely strict social distancing precautions, which has affected production capacity at the peeling factories.



Strict social distancing at Moroccan shrimp peeling plants has affected the shrimp fleet in Holland, Germany and Denmark

'This has had a huge effect on the Dutch, Danish and German fishermen who fish for shrimp. The demand is there, but it isn't matched by processing throughput, so the fleet is not fishing to capacity and it will be this way at least until the fourth quarter of this year – maybe longer. We don't know how this is going to play out,' he said, adding that nephrops has also been hit by the drop in demand from Italy and Spain, plus cold stores are already full.

Aside from the challenges presented by the pandemic and the changing climate, the Dutch and other European fishing sectors are facing the European Green Deal with its still vague Farm to Fork ideals and demands for sustainability, as well as the emerging Biodiversity Strategy with its requirements for areas to be closed to fishing – but apparently not to other industries, such as windfarms.



Pim Visser, chief executive of Dutch industry association VisNed

'There are some huge double standards here, and there is also no provision for double use,' Pim Visser said.

'The question is whether an MPA is a tool for management of fisheries and other activities, or is it about habitat protection? And the EU standpoint is that this is habitat protection. The ambition for 30% of the North Sea to be closed to fishing is very threatening. This is on top of the projected loss of 26% of fishing grounds to windfarms.'

Ambitious Green Deal

He commented that the Green Deal is a hugely ambitious initiative, of which fishing is only a part, and this is now open for public consultation, as is the EU Wind at Sea strategy.



There are significant double standards concerning windfarm expansion and seabed access

'We also see that nobody knows anything about long-term changes in ocean currents or silt deposits caused by windfarms, so this huge ambition is matched by very little real knowledge. At the moment our Prime Minister says he is taking 100% decisions on Covid on the basis of 50% knowledge – but this is taking 100% decisions on windfarms backed by not more than 10% knowledge.'

He commented that it is emerging that the knives are now out for any kind of bottom fishing, frequently regardless of any kind of scientific evidence.

'We see that Bloom is positioning itself to oppose any kind of fishing that has ground contact, and this ties in with the ambitions of the Green Deal. It seems that now that pulse trawling has been banned, all bottom contact gear is next on the list.'

'And we have Brexit. With a few months to go and nobody knows what's happening or what the outcome might be,' Pim Visser said.

'We hear what the hardliners are saying in Britain, but the reality is that we have fished these waters together since the Middle Ages and we know what the benefits are of sustainable co-management. So let's keep it that way. Let's turn down the noise and be sensible.'

He commented that an underlying question is of who is likely to benefit from Brexit – and there still haven't been any convincing answers.

'Is it the few already very wealthy pelagic operators?' he asked.

'We keep hearing people talking about the injustice of cod shares in the Channel – but the real money made there is in scallops, not in the cod that are anyway moving northwards.'



Who actually gains from Brexit is still unclear, according to Pim Visser