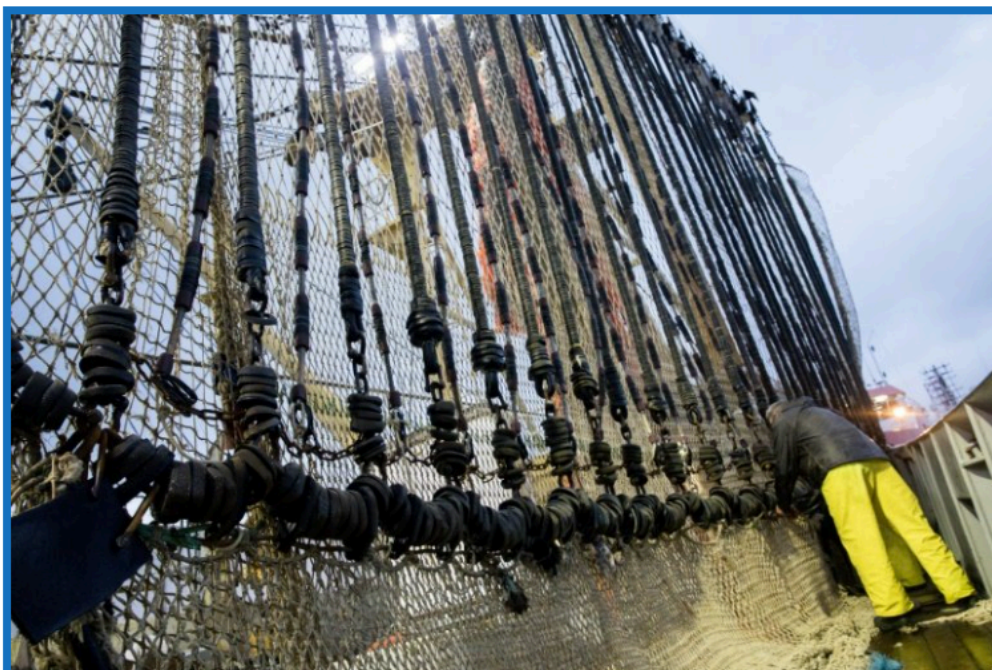


BLOOM slams Dutch Electric-Pulse Fishing Lobby as a Broken Record

by editor | Nov 20, 2020 | EU Fishing Industry, Featured News, Latest News



BLOOM claims that the Dutch electric-pulse fishing lobby group sound like a broken record

French based NGO, BLOOM has hit out at the Dutch electric-pulse fishing lobby in the European Institutions.

On Monday 16 November, the European Parliament's PECH Committee [heard a presentation](#) on a report regarding [advice on electric-pulse fishing](#) from Mark Dickey-Collas who is the Chairperson at the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) Advisory Committee.

The report presented by Mark Dickey-Collas was commissioned by the Netherlands government and carried out by WG ELECTRA on behalf of ICES. The Netherlands requested the report after the EU moved to ban the fishing-method in 2019 after a vote in the European Parliament.

In their advice summary the ICES said "ICES advises that the change from conventional beam trawling to pulse trawling when exploiting the total allowable catch of North Sea sole contributes to reducing the ecosystem/environmental impacts of the sole fishery.

"ICES advice analyses the ecosystem/environmental effects of the pulse trawl sole fishery on North Sea ecosystems.

"However, the advice does not consider other forms of electrical fishing, such as those for brown shrimp (*Crangon crangon*) or razorshells (*Ensis arcuatus*), nor does it consider pulse fisheries in other ecosystems. Provided that the sole stock."

Dutch representatives have taken the report to mean electric-pulse fishing has the green light but many MEPs and other scientists have criticised the report for being too narrow in its scope.

Dutch MEP and Vice-Chair of the PECH Committee Mark van Dalen, [criticised his fellow MEPs](#) for voting to ban electric-pulse fishing, although at the time, numerous studies had failed to establish the fishing method as an alternative to conventional beam trawling.

Since the ICES report in May, Dutch lobby groups in the European Institutions have been working hard to put the issue of electric-pulse fishing back on the table, and Germany, in its Presidency of the EU has promised to reopen the debate.

Organisations such as BLOOM, who fought against the introduction of electric-pulse fishing have slammed the Dutch campaign comparing it to a broken record which plays in a loop.

They write:

Electric fishing broken record plays in a loop

"The ban on electric fishing was so fatal to the Dutch lobby, on the verge of collapsing,[1] that it works tirelessly at the European level to have the ban lifted.

*The situation, as tedious as it gets, could be comical if not dangerous... **The strategy of the Dutch electric fishing lobby – repeating the same lies over and over again – is indeed well known and used.**[2] Unfortunately, this strategy has harmful impacts on democracy and the confidence that citizens have in their institutions, as evidenced across the Atlantic.*

The latest Dutch gesticulation to date is the [debate of 16 November 2020](#) held in the European Parliament's Committee on Fisheries. It was held on the initiative of Dutch MEP Peter van Dalen, Vice-President of the same Committee. Nothing new on the horizon, but that did not prevent this Dutch MEP from claiming victory following the debate, by announcing the [possible come back of electric fishing](#) in European waters in 2021.

Pulling strings in broad daylight

The subject of this home-made fuss is a [Special Advice](#) from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), which was published in May 2020 in response to a question from the Netherlands.[3] They asked ICES to compare the impacts of electric fishing with those of regular beam trawling, a method that is widely condemned at the global level and considered to be one of the most destructive ones. Did the Netherlands ask for a comparison with the lowest-impact fishing methods? No, of course not, because that would have been embarrassing, to say the least: such a comparison was done in 2012 by Dutch researchers, but was subsequently abandoned because electric fishing scored very poorly compared to other methods such as the nets used by small-scale fishers in the North of France![4]

*At the request of **Dutch** MEPs in favour of electric fishing, Dr. Mark Dickey-Collas, President of ICES's Advisory Council – who became a **Dutch** citizen in September 2019,[5] but who was also the head fisheries advisor to the **Dutch** government and a former researcher at the **Dutch** research institute IMARES/Wageningen U&R – was called to take the stand and present this Special Advice commissioned by the **Dutch**. The aforementioned **Dutch** institute, at the forefront of 'research' on electric fishing, produced most of the analyses used to formulate the ICES Special Advice; an institute largely funded by the **Dutch** electric fishing lobby. In 2019, **we had in fact demonstrated that 100% of the European funds allocated to 'research' on electric fishing by the Netherlands had always first transited through one of the representatives of electric fishing** (VisNed, Nederlandse Visserbond etc.).*

In short: a Dutchman presented a report commissioned by the Dutch and written on the basis of Dutch research funded by those, Dutch, whom this research is supposed to judge... The outright manipulation of an all-powerful and untouchable lobby, in order to satisfy the financial interests of the cynical industrials it represents.

*The presence of Valérie Tankink – also **Dutch**, former head of the European Commission's Legal Service and now in charge of the electric fishing file – as a speaker should also be noted. Although **she tiptoed with great professionalism, she nevertheless gave us some hope regarding a potential legal action against the Netherlands** (see below). Unbelievable! It is indeed high time that the European Commission finally took the measure of the scandal that this dossier represents, as its behaviour – condoning the Netherlands' illegal practices for years – is unacceptable and has damaged the trust that citizens and many MEPs have in it.*

Misguided science at the service of those lobbies who finance it

*As mentioned above, the 'science' on which this ICES Special Advice is based is biased at its source, because the questions are asked by industrials with vested interests, who then fund researchers to answer them. Two years ago, when the exact same question was already asked, the Special Advice at the time had called for [strong criticism from Ifremer](#), even though this institute usually dislikes publicly criticising its colleagues. History repeats itself like music that goes round and round in order to cast doubt on the validity of the electric fishing ban. This strategy of disinformation, visible in all sectors, is classical and can sometimes be victorious. In this deleterious process, **institutions such as the ICES, but also the European Commission and Parliament, lose credibility and risk undermining democracy in Europe, which has already been badly damaged by the rise of extremes and the growing mistrust of citizens in their political decision-makers.***

*Regarding the instrumentalisation of science, the Dutch are not at their trial run. During our campaign against electric fishing, BLOOM revealed the [web of lies](#) that surrounds this file, starting with the European Commission wrongfully claiming in 2006 that it had the agreement of the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) to issue the first derogations for electric fishing, which was banned in 1998. Two further sets of derogations allowing more vessels to be equipped were subsequently justified by the need for scientific research.[6] However, this research never took place until 2018, when the electric fishing lobby's dream of expansion was shattered by our revelations. **This fraud, already brought to light by ICES,[7] was confirmed by the Dutch Minister Carola Schouten's herself**, following the [investigation of a journalist](#) from the Dutch newspaper NOS in 2018.*

Since then, the Dutch research institute has been running at full speed, botching research watered down with funding and data from industry. This research should have been carried out by an international consortium before the very first exemption was granted. How much credit should be given to this rushed 'research'? Absolutely none, let's not be duped.

No political repercussion but heavy social and environmental consequences

As [Caroline Roose](#), Member of Parliament, rightly pointed out in her address to Valérie Tankink, the representative of the European Commission at the debate, the real, persistent problem is that of fraud: “This Advice wants to distract us from the real issue, the fact that the Dutch government does not comply with the European legislation”. In response, **Tankink modestly admitted that the Commission was investigating the matter and that it would not hesitate to use the tools at its disposal to better enforce the regulation.** A touch of hope for us, but still very weak in view of the European Commission’s actions for the past three years (we filed our first complaint against the Netherlands in October 2017).^[8]

Unfortunately, this fraud continues with impunity – not to mention the illegal practices of many electric trawlers –^[9] with serious consequences for small-scale fishers in the North Sea. Dunkirk’s fish auction [closed its doors for good](#) on 22 October 2020 because catches of sole, a species targeted in the same area by both French gillnetters and Dutch electric trawlers, have become insufficient to maintain its profitability. MEP Pierre Karleskind, Chairman of the Committee on Fisheries, asked a pertinent question to ICES on this matter, but it was ignored by his interlocutor: “You write in your report that sole is managed in a sustainable manner, please explain why sole is declining in a number of fish auctions?”. Didier Gascuel, professor at the Agro Institute and STECF member, was taken aback by the lack of response from Mark Dickey-Collas and reacted [on Twitter](#): “It is amazing that ICES does not have any answer to this”. There are, however, many elements supporting the ban on electric fishing, including those identified by researchers who have historically been pro-electric fishing. In particular, Hans Polet, a very prolific researcher on electric fishing, commented on an ICES document in a press release which was later deleted (but which [we saved here](#)): “[our institute] **ILVO has clearly demonstrated that the Belgian 12 nautical mile zone has been fished in an indiscriminate manner by Dutch electric trawlers. Their practices have clearly had a negative impact on fish stocks off the Belgian coast.** Moreover, the complaints of Belgian, French and English small-scale fishers, who suffered from unfair competition from electric fishing, were not taken seriously”.

Electric fishing is rightly prohibited, let's keep it that way

*Not content with having already brought an action before the European Court of Justice to have the ban on electric fishing lifted – which is incredible when one thinks about the level of illegality of the entire electric fishing endeavour – **the Netherlands now aims to scuttle the ban on electric fishing by trying to cast doubt in the MEPs minds. Once again, they are trying to force their will on other Member States and decision makers.***

But the conclusion of this debate is yet another failure by Dutch lobbies in their quest. MEPs from all political sides reaffirmed their position in favour of a ban on electric fishing, with the exception of the three Dutch MEPs who support the electric lobby. While the Netherlands feels all-powerful and exempt from complying with the laws, it is up to the European Commission to set them straight and demand compliance with European regulations. The Commission plans to publish a report before summer 2021 on the implementation of the new “Technical Measures” regulation. In the meantime, illegal derogations are still active, and no sanctions against the Netherlands have been taken.”

Notes and references

[1] As a reminder, the Netherlands had officially equipped 84 vessels with electric trawls until 1 June 2019, whereas only 15 were regulatory (figures based on the European Fleet Register, available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fleet-europa/search_en).

New unpublished data, published by BLOOM in September 2020, actually show that this figure was more likely to be close to 100 vessels equipped!

[2] See for example this book: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/merchants-of-doubt-9781608193943/>.

[3] BLOOM analysed and decrypted this advice.

[4] Taal & Zaalmlink (2012) ‘Vissen met zorg’ – Factsheets kwaliteit en duurzaamheidstaandwant-, puls-, twinrig- en flyshootvisserij.

[5] See for example: https://www.facebook.com/nlembassydenmark/posts/2361136917275038?comment_id=2362426157146114

[6] 20 derogations were issued in 2010 under Article 43 of Regulation 950/98 for scientific research and 42 derogations for a pilot project in 2014 under Article 14 of Regulation 1380/2013.

[7] “The issuing of 84 licences to carry out further scientific data collection is not in the spirit of the previous advice and that such a level of expansion is not justified from a scientific perspective. [...] This is well in excess of the 5% limit included in the current legislation. At this level this is essentially permitting a commercial fishery under the guise of scientific research” ICES (2015) Second interim report of the working group on electrical trawling (WGELECTRA). IJmuiden, the Netherlands, 10-12 November 2015 Copenhagen (Denmark).

[8] The European Commission has already recognised the illegality of many of the Dutch derogations, without initiating any procedure against them:

- on [1 February 2019](#), mentioning its intention to open a formal infringement procedure against the Netherlands;
- on [29 July 2020](#) by confirming that the Netherlands had the right to keep 15 – not 22 (at least) – derogations until 30 June 2021, when the latter derogations will be withdrawn and electric fishing will be completely banned.

[9] Many vessels – including some involved in 'scientific research' – have been shown to fish in [prohibited areas](#) or with [illegal mesh sizes](#). BLOOM also revealed that electric fishing trawler TH10 regularly but [illegally fished within 12 Belgian miles](#), despite the fact that Belgium banned this technique in its territorial waters [in August 2019](#).