Don't sink the Common Fisheries Policy - fulfil its potential

OCTOBER 2025



As the European Commission prepares its evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), **environmental NGOs across Europe and beyond urge EU and national policymakers to help build a sustainable and resilient fishing sector by upholding regulatory stability and prioritising the effective implementation of existing law**.[1] Efforts should focus on developing and integrating impactful solutions within the current EU framework.

Strengthening the implementation of the CFP offers immediate socio-economic and regulatory benefits. It provides stability and predictability for fishers and coastal communities, prevents years of legislative uncertainty, and allows the EU to deliver faster on sustainability goals. Consistent enforcement can drive economic resilience in fisheries while restoring ocean health without the delays and risks associated with a full reform process.

In practice, this means less institutional upheaval, bureaucracy, and uncertainty - and a greater emphasis on delivering tangible results on the ground. **The challenge is to close the gap between the CFP commitments and reality, not to redesign it.**

The European Environment Agency (EEA)'s findings leave no room for doubt: in 2020 it found overfishing, bycatch, and habitat degradation are driving marine biodiversity loss, with 90% of Europe's marine areas under pressure from human activity.[2] In 2025, the EEA

finds “unsustainable fishing levels” in the EU persist due to “implementation gaps”, such as inconsistencies in counting discarded catches against quota, which contribute to not meeting the CFP’s objective of exploiting all stocks at maximum sustainable yield (MSY). Rising temperatures, pollution, and invasive alien species continue to compound these threats, pushing the ocean to the brink.[3] At the same time, the World Economic Forum ranks biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse - including in the ocean - as one of the most severe global risks of the next decade.[4]

The CFP remains the EU’s strongest tool for reversing the decline. Now is the time to honour its commitments through full and consistent implementation. Anything else risks deepening the most severe threats to our fundamentals of life, health and economy.

Practice shows: it works. And it’s needed more than ever

Where fully implemented, the CFP has proven effective - delivering real, measurable benefits for the marine environment and for the communities that rely on healthy fish stocks. Where implementation has fallen short, however, fisheries remain at risk.[5,6]

> For the Baltic, the Commission couldn’t be clearer: **“unless the Member States apply and implement EU legislation in full, fish stocks will not recover.”** [7]

The CFP's objectives aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of fishing through an ecosystem-based and precautionary approach. As such, they contribute to securing food supplies, supporting fair livelihoods for coastal fishers, and strengthening the long-term resilience of the sector. Crucially, **the socioeconomic and environmental objectives of the CFP are interdependent and mutually reinforcing** - a healthy ocean is the foundation of viable fisheries, and sustainable fisheries are essential to thriving coastal communities.

1 BirdLife International Europe and Central Asia, ClientEarth, FishSec, Oceana, Our Fish, Seas At Risk, & WWF. (2021). Common Fisheries Policy: Mission not yet accomplished. https://seas-at-risk.org/publications/common-fisheries-policy-mission-not-yet-accomplished/

2 EEA. (2020). Marine Messages II, Navigating the course towards clean, healthy and productive seas through implementation of an ecosystem-based approach, EEA Report No 17/2019. European Environment Agency Report, Copenhagen. https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/marine-messages-2/

3 EEA. (2025). Europe’s environment and climate: Knowledge for resilience, prosperity and sustainability (EEA Report No. 11/2025). https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/europe-environment-2025/main-report

4 World Economic Forum. (2025). The global risks report 2025 (20th ed.). https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/digest/

5 European Commission. (2023). The common fisheries policy today and tomorrow: A Fisheries and Oceans Pact towards sustainable, science-based, innovative and inclusive fisheries management (COM(2023) 103 final). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0103.

6 The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2021). Lessons from implementation of the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy: Mixed record highlights steps still needed to turn the tide towards better management. https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2021/03/lessons-from-implementation-of-the-eus-common-fisheries-policy

7 European Commission. (2024). Sustainable fishing in the EU: State of play and orientations for 2025 (COM(2024) 235 final). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0235

The adoption of the revised CFP in 2013 marked a significant step forward. According to the Commission's own reporting, many parts of the EU fleet have become more profitable, labour productivity has increased, and the status of several fish stocks has improved.[8] However, progress has been uneven. Where implementation has lagged, so too have the ecological and socioeconomic outcomes. Employment trends highlight this mixed picture: although average wages and productivity have risen, the overall number of fishers - particularly in the small-scale fleet - has declined, reflecting ongoing fleet consolidation and the erosion of coastal communities.[9]

This should be taken as evidence that the Regulation works - when properly applied. Fairer allocation of fishing opportunities (Article 17) and preferential access to coastal waters for the small-scale fleet (Recital 19) are just two examples of existing provisions that can help address these challenges, if fully enforced. The priority now is not to rewrite the rules, but to close the implementation gaps so that progress benefits the entire sector.

	Biological indicators*		Economic indicators**			Social indicators**		
	NE Atlantic (% of stocks subject to over-fishing)	Mediterra-nean (% of stocks subject to overfishing)	Gross profit (Million EUR)	Net profit margin (%)	Engine power (million kW, excl. UK)	Nº of active vessels (thou-sands, excl. UK) ***	FTE (thou-sands, excl. UK)	Average wage per FTE (thousands EUR) ****
2013	40	70	1321	5	5.72	60.9	102.7	25.3
2023	22 (-45%)	51 (-27%)	1461 (+11%)	11 (+120%)	5.24 (-8%)	52.8 (-13%)	75.8 (-26%)	32.9 (+30%)

*Source: STECF Adhoc 24-01. Fish populations with FMSY reference points available. The last year with available information for the Mediterranean is 2022.

**Source: STECF 24-03 & 24-07. Economic performance of the EU fishing fleet (some data excluding Greece), figures for 2023 are based on economic forecasts.

***STECF. (2023). Prellezo, R., E. Sabatella, J. Virtanen, M. Tardy Martorell and J. Guillen (eds.)., The 2023 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 23-07), Ispra, Italy: Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), pp., 26-27 and Data Annex; Paulrud, A., N. Carvalho, A. Borrello and A. Motova (eds.) (2015), The 2015 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 15-07), Ispra, Italy: Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), pp. 46-47, 49, 75, 80.

****This figure is limited for a nuanced comparison because it overlooks the wage disparities between small-scale coastal fishing and large-scale fishing crews, as well as the differences in wages among EU countries, particularly between Northern and Southern European nations.

8 Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). (2024). The 2024 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 24-03 and 24-07), PRELLEZO, R., SABATELLA, E.C., VIRTANEN, J., TARDY MARTORELL, M. and GUILLEN, J. editor(s), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, doi:10.2760/5037826, JRC139642.

9 Kuepper, B. (2025). Power structures shaping EU fisheries - How the political economy favours industrial over small scale, low impact fishing, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Profundo, commissioned by Seas At Risk, BUND, Ecologistas en Acción and Sciaena. https://seas-at-risk.org/publications/study-power-structures-shaping-eu-fisheries-how-the-political-economy-favours-industrial-over-small-scale-low-impact-fishing/

Implementing the CFP delivers real profits, saving time and money

Implementing the CFP as it stands is the most effective, simple and time efficient way to achieve measurable improvements in fisheries management and ocean health in the short to medium term. In the current pursuit of simplification by the European institutions, initiating a lengthy and uncertain legislative process to reform a Regulation that is already efficient, if applied correctly, would be counterproductive.

By contrast, reopening the CFP Regulation would trigger years of polarisation and policy paralysis - precisely when fisheries governance must move forward. A reform process would stretch over several years - added up with years of national adaptation - during which enforcement risks being deprioritised, leaving the sector in a state of legal and regulatory limbo.

Such a vacuum would stall progress at a time where decisive action is urgently needed to tackle the triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution, while addressing worsening socio-economic conditions faced by small-scale fishers and coastal communities. Economic concentration in the sector and growing resource scarcity already threaten their survival; years of legislative gridlock would only make matters worse.

Implementing EU law is not only a legal obligation under the EU Treaties - it is also economically beneficial and essential for a competitive and thriving EU. Simply fully implementing EU environmental laws (excluding fisheries legislation) could already save the EU economy around €180 billion every year in health and direct environmental costs. Where relevant legislation is not implemented and targets are not met, benefits for environmental quality, human health, and the economy are lost.[10]

10 European Commission. (2025). 2025 Environmental Implementation Review. Environmental implementation for prosperity and security (COM(2025) 420 final).

So what's needed? An integrated toolbox

1. The mission is right: the CFP's objectives remain vital

Achieving the objectives of the CFP is fundamental to the survival of our fisheries. They are fully aligned with the EU's economic, environmental and social commitments, and directly address urgent ocean challenges. There is also scope to strengthen the wider policy framework in which the CFP operates through subsidiary instruments and financial tools.

2. Boost implementation and enforcement of the CFP and related policies

What is needed now is a clear, concrete implementation roadmap with measurable milestones, dedicated resources, and strengthened accountability - as outlined e.g. in a CFP Implementation Action Plan.[11]

Simplification should not serve as a pretext to weaken existing environmental targets and obligations. *Simplification* can be found in:

a. consistent implementation of already agreed international and EU targets and objectives - from the 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework, to the High Seas Treaty and the Paris Agreement, to the European laws and strategies such as the Nature Restoration Law, the revised Fisheries Control Regulation, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and the Biodiversity and Climate Adaptation Strategies.

b. a reliable enforcement framework, as outlined in the CFP Implementation Action Plan.

To ensure compliance with the CFP, two key instruments come into play:

a. The recent revision of the **EU Fisheries Control Regulation**, adopted in late 2023, had among its objectives to facilitate CFP implementation, reduce unnecessary administrative burden, and promote a level playing field across Member States.

   To achieve these goals, the regulation introduces digital tools that streamline control procedures and ease the reporting obligations for operators. For example, requiring electronic fishing logbooks, tracking devices and remote electronic monitoring will not only save time but also enhance traceability and enforcement capacity across the EU.

11 ClientEarth. (2024). Common Fisheries Policy – Evaluation: Response to the call for evidence. https://www.clientearth.org/media/xtaigq43/clientearth_cfp-evaluation-response_september-2024.pdf

By reducing manual processes and enabling smarter, harmonised controls, this reform supports more transparent seafood supply chains and fairer treatment of operators. Most regulatory provisions will be phased in between 2026 and 2030, ensuring a manageable and coordinated rollout across Member States. This regulatory update offers policymakers a practical pathway to reduce burdens, improve compliance, and modernise fisheries governance across the EU.

b. Enforcing the **EU IUU Fishing Regulation**, in conjunction with the Fisheries Control Regulation is crucial to ensure that imports of fishery products from third countries entering the EU market are subject to the same controls and meet the same requirements as the EU fleet. To protect the EU fishing sector from unfair competition, uniform and stringent controls on imports are required, particularly through enhanced traceability for prepared and preserved products, and stricter verification of catch certificates, especially from high-risk or yellow-carded countries. The EU is one of the world's largest markets for fishery products, and over 70% of seafood consumed in the EU is imported. Imports can originate from countries with lower environmental, social, and labour standards undermining the competitiveness of EU fisheries and increasing the risk of unsustainable sourcing, including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and labour rights violations.

3. Build synergies and benefit from ongoing legal processes - from the EU Ocean Act, to the CMO, to the MFF

New laws are on their way already. By focusing efforts on effective implementation and targeted improvement of supporting instruments, policymakers can make a real and timely difference "in the water":

a. **The upcoming EU Ocean Act can strengthen coherence** across EU ocean policies, reinforcing the implementation of ecosystem-based fisheries management, marine protection, and restoration - both domestically and internationally - through the EU's ocean diplomacy and the sustainable management of the EU fleet operating within and beyond EU waters. The Ocean Act should also support the fishing sector's transition toward more sustainable fishing practices in the long term, addressing fish stock management as well as economic and social dimensions.

b. **The current evaluation and potential revision of the Common Market Organisation (CMO) can help enhance the competitiveness of the EU fisheries industry** by promoting fair competition and a level playing field for all products marketed within it. It can also improve market transparency and provide consumers with accurate product information - and, in the end, to boost consumer appetite for responsibly sourced EU products.

c. **The revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) can help to correct structural imbalances in the sector**, as well as support the diversification and resilience of fishing communities. It must direct future investments towards climate and biodiversity targets and redirect harmful subsidies. Member States should also fully leverage available EU funds to support a sustainable seafood supply to EU consumers. This includes investing in the recovery of fish stocks, improved marketing of fishery products to encourage a diverse and sustainable consumption of EU seafood (including species that are readily available but less in demand), adopting cost-effective technology for monitoring and controlling fisheries, and raising public awareness of the health and environmental benefits of responsibly sourced EU seafood.

