

Seas At Risk's statement of concern regarding the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors

- April 2020 -

The COVID-19 pandemic is having dramatic consequences on people and the economy. We are experiencing unprecedented challenges to citizen's health and livelihoods. It is essential that during this time of crisis, our leaders issue a strong response to save lives and preserve societal wellbeing while building a more sustainable, fair and resilient economy and society.

Europe's fishers and aquaculture farmer's economic activities are also facing detrimental impacts due to the COVID-19 crisis. Some fishers and aquaculture farmers are not able to respect the social distancing measures and risk getting infected if they work. The lockdown of cities, closure of restaurants and lack of tourism is having an impact on the demand and price of certain fresh fish. Governments are already providing urgent support to address the health crisis itself and emergency rescue measures will be required to avoid bankruptcies of solvent small businesses due to the sudden stand-still of the economy. These rescue measures are necessary and national governments can provide immediate support through state aid for which the ceiling was enlarged to €120,000 per undertaking, and supported by specific EU funds for crisis situations¹.

Even larger EU support is underway, and the EU institutions are fast-tracking decisions to use the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) for temporary cessation of fishing activities, suspension or reduction of aquaculture production, and temporary storage of fisheries and aquaculture products. Swift action is necessary to support those whose livelihoods are threatened. Transparency in decision-making must not be sacrificed for speed, however, nor should hasty or damaging decisions set us on a course towards further degradation of the ocean. There is a need to ensure that using EMFF money during this crisis does not become a source of harmful subsidies, now and in the future.

Seas At Risk share a number of concerns related to the planned use of current EMFF money to address this crisis:

1. Granting of temporary cessations:

- a. Under the current EMFF, when temporary cessation subsidies are given, the competent authority needs to verify that the fishing vessel concerned has stopped fishing during the period concerned. However, because of legitimate concerns over the potential exposure of observers, crew, inspectors, and port workers to the virus, monitoring and control of fishing activities is compromised during the crisis. It may, therefore, be more difficult to ensure that those fishing vessels receiving temporary cessation subsidies have in fact stopped their economic activity. We therefore ask that **a part of the emergency funding from the current EMFF is used to put in place where possible adequate alternative control measures** such as Electronic Monitoring.
- b. Importantly, **the ring-fenced amount intended for monitoring and control under the current EMFF should be maintained.**
- c. If financial compensation is granted, **only active vessels should be eligible**, meaning vessels that have carried out fishing activities at sea for at least 120 days during the last two calendar years preceding the date of submission of the application for support.

¹ See: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/28/the-union-s-expenditure>. These special flexibility instruments may be used in the event of economic crises (e.g. the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund), humanitarian emergencies (e.g. the Emergency Aid Reserve) or other unexpected needs (e.g. the Flexibility Instrument) in EU Member States.

- d. If fishers receive financial compensation for stopping their economic activity because of the COVID-19 crisis, there **should not be any un-fished quota roll-over to next year** as this would represent double compensation, being already paid for leaving the fish in the water.
- e. The dispositions currently adopted under the EMFF to respond to this unprecedented crisis should be **time-bound** and should not be extended longer than what is necessary and, in any case, no later than 31st December 2020.

2. Negotiations for future EMFF:

- a. As a matter of principle, structural funds, such as the EMFF, should not be used to deal with acute crises. The EMFF is the financial instruments to promote sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, protect the aquatic environment, and support sustainable coastal livelihoods. While the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented, scientists have warned that pandemics and other similar emergencies will become more frequent in the future as the climate and biodiversity crises keep unfolding. The **current situation should not create a precedent** whereupon funds from the future EMFF keep being used to support unviable businesses **to the detriment of supporting the transition to sustainable and low-impact fishers and aquaculture farmers and protecting the marine environment.**
- b. The ongoing crisis **should not be used to advocate for the introduction of capacity-enhancing support or the reintroduction of temporary cessations** with weakened conditions in the new EMFF. The European NGOs have set [clear red lines](#) so that the EMFF does not contribute to overfishing and overcapacity and, on the contrary, enables the European Union to respond effectively to the environmental crisis in line with our international commitments. These red lines are all the more relevant today.
- c. Recovery plans developed to relaunch the economy post-crisis should be guided by a long-term vision for a sustainable future, in line with the European Green Deal. The on-going negotiations for the future EMFF 2021-2027 should reflect this and channel investments in such a way that it **will help the fisheries and aquaculture sector become fully sustainable and low-impact²**, creating long-lasting jobs, protecting marine biodiversity and making the sector more resilient to future crises, in particular the climate and biodiversity crises we are facing.

3. Transparency and stakeholder engagement:

- a. Data on actual income loss or reduced sales in each Member State and its associated fleets and aquaculture farms are not yet publicly available. **Gathering and publicly sharing of such data is essential** before any decisions are made so that public spending matches the real needs of the sector.
- b. We are facing an unprecedented situation and understand that decisions have had to be made quickly to provide emergency relief. Civil society organisations working for ocean protection and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture also have a strong interest in how such emergency relief funding is spent. We regret, therefore, that urgent consultations with all stakeholders, in particular civil society organisations, were not held for the development of the second package of measures. Unfortunately, Fisheries Advisory Councils (ACs) are not set up for immediate responses as there are many parties to be consulted, and the quick consultation of the ACs on these measures resulted in reactions of selected groups of people rather than the whole AC, and led to the exclusion of NGO positions. We hope that lessons learned will be drawn and that **emergency consultation procedures are put in place to ensure that, in similar crisis situations, the voice of all relevant stakeholders are taken into account.**

² [Summary brochure](#) of a report outlining possible gear shifts to reduce direct and indirect environmental impacts of fishing activities, giving an inventory of hurdles preventing fishermen to shift based on case studies, and proposing policy measures to overcome these hurdles and promote low impact fisheries.