

A decade with the “2013” Common Fisheries Policy: Charting Progress, Navigating Challenges

SEPTEMBER 2026



GLOSSARY

The **Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY)** is the highest theoretical yield that can be taken continuously, from a stock under existing average environmental conditions without significantly affecting reproduction. Under Article 2 of the CFP, EU fisheries management must achieve exploitation rates that restore stocks above levels capable of producing MSY for all harvested species - by 2020 the latest.

In other words: MSY fishing rates mean catching as many fish as possible without leaving too few behind to reproduce. It is a single-species approach that must be complemented with an ecosystem-based approach, as enshrined in the CFP, so that other pressures on the targeted fish populations are taken into account.

The **landing obligation** is the legal requirement, as per Article 15 of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), to land all catches of species subject to catch limits and, in the Mediterranean Sea, also catches of species subject to minimum sizes.

In other words: the rule aims to make fisheries more sustainable by ensuring that catches are fully documented, reducing waste and giving fishers an incentive to avoid unwanted catches in the first place.

The **fishing capacity ceiling**, set out in Article 22 of the CFP, is a limit on the gross tonnage and engine power that national fishing fleets must not exceed. The limits are set in Annex IV of the CFP. These ceilings aim to reduce the risk of overcapacity and excessive pressure on fish stocks, while supporting a better balance between fleet capacity and the fishing opportunities available, which is essential for the profitability of the fleet.

In other words: capacity ceilings aim to keep the size and power of fleets in balance with the fish available to catch, so that not too big or powerful vessels are competing for too few fish.

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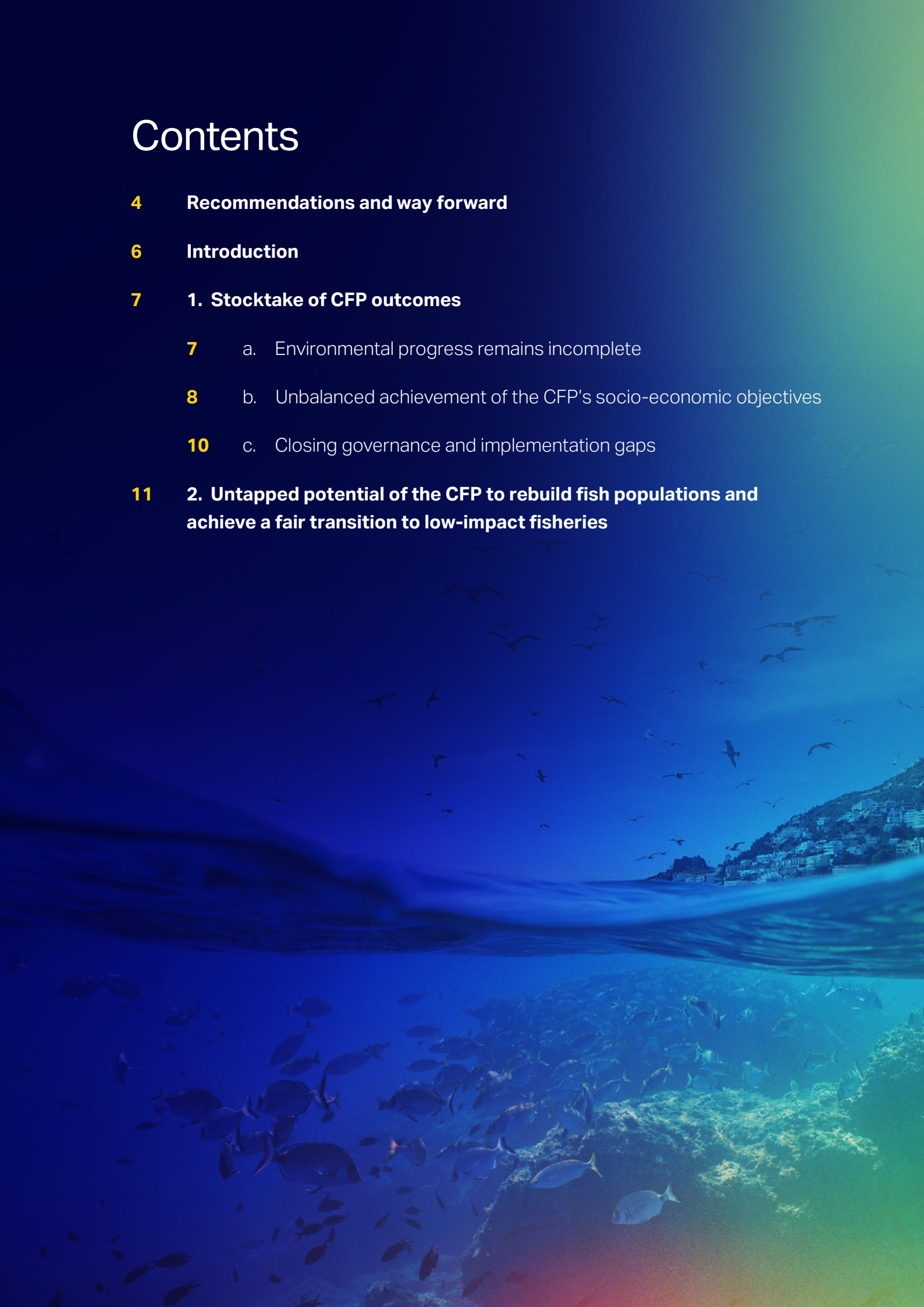
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Recommendations and way forward

The undersigned organisations call on European decision-makers to take the following recommendations into account when determining the next steps following the CFP evaluation:

- 1 Accelerate implementation.** Building on the evaluation, the full and effective implementation of the CFP must be accelerated across all EU sea basins, in close cooperation with coastal Member States and all relevant stakeholders. Successful results should be replicated – such as the increased mesh size in Spain for the demersal fleet or the impressive recovery of bluefin tuna stocks in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea, both achieved through science-based management, political leadership, effective enforcement and sustained advocacy from civil society. The current EU **Fisheries Control Regulation offers the tools to speed this up.**
- 2 Restore fish population health and rebuild depleted populations.** Management must look beyond simple population numbers and ensure that fish populations also possess a natural age structure, size distribution, and growth rates indicative of a thriving ecosystem. Simply limiting catch levels to MSY is insufficient for full recovery – targeted rebuilding plans should be triggered whenever populations fall below safe thresholds. Where habitat damage or other pressures hinder recovery, these root causes must be addressed first. Priority should be given to ecosystem restoration and the protection of essential fish habitats.
- 3 Scientific advice must better reflect ecosystem realities.** The Commission should strengthen its requests for advice from ICES and other scientific bodies so that fisheries advice integrates the ecosystem-based approach. The advice should systematically account for species interactions, food-web dynamics, population age and size structure, habitat condition, other human-induced pressures, environmental change, climate impacts and scientific uncertainty. For depleted or unhealthy populations, recurring rebuilding advice should set out possible recovery trajectories, indicative timeframes and the risks associated with different management options. Until full recovery focused and ecosystem-based advice is available, decision-makers should apply additional precaution when setting fishing opportunities. At the same time, the scientific advice must clearly communicate scientific uncertainty, trade-offs and risk associated with the different catch options.
- 4 Do not let simplification become deregulation.** Fisheries depend on healthy fish stocks, and weakening the rules would undermine the very resource the sector relies on. Instead, simplification should mean better implementation, more coherence, and a faster transition towards fair, low-impact fisheries.
- 5 Re-direct funding to reward low-impact fishing and effective CFP implementation.** The revision of the EU Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) and the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) must prohibit all direct and indirect capacity-enhancing subsidies. They should also prioritise public investment in climate-resilient, nature-positive activities and enable the just transition to low-impact fisheries. During the ongoing EMFAF revision, the European Commission must direct funding to the transition

towards low-impact fisheries and to marine protection and restoration. Furthermore, for the upcoming MFF, the fisheries budget should be split equally: 50% dedicated to facilitating the sector's transition towards low-impact practices and supporting low-impact fishers, including the clean energy transition, and 50% for protecting and restoring marine ecosystems¹.

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Design the upcoming European Ocean Act to align policy. The **upcoming European Ocean Act, expected by the end of 2026, is a critical opportunity** to bring coherence in fisheries and environment policies and to support the implementation of sectoral legislation. It should enable the achievement of Good Environmental Status and require the **legally binding protection of 30% of EU seas**, including a 10% strict protection target. Furthermore, it should support **preferential access within the 12 nautical miles to low-impact activities, as well as nature protection and restoration projects**. The EU Ocean Dashboard should track progress on environmental and socio-economic objectives.

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Strengthen transparency through the Common Market Organisation (CMO). The evaluation and potential revision of the CMO for fishery and aquaculture products can strengthen transparency and traceability. Article 35 should extend mandatory consumer information to processed and preserved products, including canned seafood, and require the food-service sector to provide it to their consumers. Closing these gaps would support informed, sustainable choices, help exclude products linked to illegal practices, environmental harm or abusive working conditions from the EU market, and create a level playing field for EU producers.

In line with international case law, the International Court of Justice has reaffirmed in a landmark decision in 2025 that the EU and its Member States must do their "utmost" to protect the marine environment and fight climate change. States must meet a stringent due-diligence standard in doing so, and their measures must rest on the best available science and a precautionary approach.² There is no room for weakening existing standards, Member States must make full use of the tools already at their disposal – from legislation and administrative procedures to effective enforcement³ – to protect the marine environment and secure the long-term survival of the coastal communities.

¹ BirdLife Europe and Central Asia, BLOOM Association, Blue Marine Foundation, ClientEarth and Seas At Risk, [The Next EU Budget: Investing in Ocean Resilience and Thriving Coastal Communities](#), 2026.

² ICJ, Advisory Opinion 2025, paras. 138, 270, 294, 343.

³ See ITLOS, Advisory Opinion 2024, para. 235; ICJ, Advisory Opinion 2025, para 281.

Introduction

The recent evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is unequivocal:

"The CFP Regulation remains a very important and relevant tool to manage a common natural resource and related economic activities in a changing world".⁴

Built on decades of engagement and successive adaptive reforms, the CFP provides an effective framework for sustainable fisheries management. Where there is room for improvement, this owes far more to a failure to implement the current legislation than to any fault in the framework itself:

"Inefficiencies and gaps identified in the evaluation and by stakeholders are often dependent on the full implementation of its provisions or provisions of secondary legislation."⁵

These implementation gaps should not be addressed through another revision process – one that risks weakening the substance of the CFP and wasting time we do not have. The simplest, most efficient and most timely response to the CFP evaluation is clear: implement, enforce, invest.

The solutions already exist. Now is the time to apply them – for a resilient fishing sector and a healthy marine environment for all.

⁴ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT EVALUATION Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy (SEC(2026) 133 final) - (SWD(2026) 121 final). Available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD\(2026\)120&lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD(2026)120&lang=en)

⁵ Ibid. p93.



1. Stocktake of CFP outcomes

*"The CFP Regulation provides a coherent mechanism to reconcile its three core objectives (environmental, economic and social sustainability): when stocks are healthy, the fleet has the opportunity to make a profit which can then be translated into employment and/or wage benefits. Perceptions of incoherence are linked to uneven implementation that break the links in this logical chain: if healthy stocks are not achieved, there can be no socio-economic viability. If the fleet is not rationalised, economic profit is undermined as well as wages."*⁶

a. Environmental progress remains incomplete

*"In all cases, achieving the conservation objectives of the CFP Regulation provides the basis for the socio-economic prosperity of the fisheries and aquaculture sectors."*⁷

The 2013 reform of the CFP⁸ has improved the environmental sustainability of EU fisheries, though progress has been uneven. Fishing pressure has moved closer to sustainable levels, and a growing share of assessed stocks is now exploited at or below MSY fishing rates⁹ – up from 50% in 2014 to 63% in 2022.¹⁰ The CFP has set a clear trajectory towards strengthening the ecosystem-based approach by mandating the adoption of management measures to align with EU environmental legislations¹¹. It has also established the necessary conditions to enhance the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems and improve bycatch monitoring within Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs). However, progress on the ground has been uneven, and while the policy framework is robust, these advancements remain largely theoretical as implementation consistently fails to translate these objectives into concrete action.

The evaluation shows that several environmental objectives have only been partially achieved. The overall biological status of fish populations has improved slightly, yet the proportion of populations below critical biomass levels remains a concern. Progress in reducing fishing pressure has not consistently translated into the rebuilding of fish populations. Many populations remain below healthy biomass levels, while others do not exhibit an age and size distribution indicative of a healthy population or show concerning trends in weight-at-age. Some populations are at or close to critical biological limits.

The landing obligation, too, has fallen short of achieving its objectives: there is no evidence of improved selectivity, and the capture of undersized fish has increased or shown no improvements, across the majority of fisheries and species assessed in the Baltic, the North Sea and the South Western Waters.¹² The evaluation points to several causes – insufficient data on discards under existing exemptions, the sheer number of exemptions, limited industry buy-in, and weaknesses in monitoring, control and enforcement.¹³

Because of limited political appetite, Article 11 – which provides a cooperative process ("regionalisation") for Member States to adopt conservation measures necessary to comply

⁶ Ibid., p77.

⁷ Ibid., p90.

⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, OJ L 354, 28.12.2013, pp. 22–61.

⁹ MSY is grounded in international law through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA).

¹⁰ CFP evaluation report, p25.

¹¹ The CFP legally enshrines the ecosystem-based approach and requires fisheries management to be coherent with EU environmental legislation, notably the MSFD objective of achieving Good Environmental Status (Articles 2(3) and 2(5)(j) of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013). However, fully translating this legal requirement into fisheries management remains a significant implementation challenge.

¹² CFP evaluation report, Section 3.1.2.

¹³ European Commission: European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, Study supporting the evaluation of the landing obligation – Common fisheries policy – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2926/5282226>.

with EU environmental legislations – has not been adequately used to deliver habitat and species protection, undermining EU conservation efforts¹⁴. In addition to pointing to the slow and challenging nature of the regionalisation process, the evaluation notes that coherence between the CFP and environmental legislation is not ensured in practice: there are gaps in integrating the CFP with other marine policies like the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive or the Nature Restoration Regulation. Persistent data gaps also limit the assessment of bycatch of endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species, compounded by funding and governance complexities¹⁵. Together, these findings highlight the need for stronger implementation, monitoring and reporting to fully achieve the CFP’s environmental objectives.

b. Unbalanced achievement of the CFP’s socio-economic objectives

Over the past 10 years, the fisheries and aquaculture sectors have delivered mixed results in terms of socio-economic sustainability. While the fish processing sector has performed well economically, parts of the catching sector continue to struggle.¹⁶ The incomplete recovery of stocks has resulted in lower fishing opportunities and catches for parts of the EU fleet, and to income losses across several fleet segments.

The evaluation stresses that “insufficient progress towards capacity balance undermines profitability and incomes”. Fleet capacity has declined, though more slowly than expected, and remains closely tied to the fleet’s lack of profitability – which has in turn constrained investments in vessel renewal. Combined with volatile energy prices and uncertain incomes, this has made the sector less attractive to younger generations and hindered generational renewal.

The evaluation also shows that current capacity ceilings do not prevent Member States from starting the energy transition and improving the safety of their fleets: margins remain under both gross tonnage and engine power.

The CFP also aims to secure a fair standard of living for those who depend on fishing. Yet quota allocation measures¹⁷ meant to support small-scale coastal fisheries have been poorly applied, and preferential access within the 0-12 nautical mile zone has not been put into practice.¹⁸

Smaller fleet segments are more profitable and less reliant on public subsidies

¹⁴ European Court of Auditors, *Marine environment: EU protection is wide but not deep*, Special Report 26/2020, paras. 41–43.

¹⁵ CFP evaluation report, p131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p14.

¹⁷ Article 17, Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, OJ L 354.

¹⁸ Oceana, [Oceana urges EU leaders to support low impact fishers](#), 25 June 2026.

The CFP evaluation shows how small-scale coastal fisheries, and the under-12-metre segment, hold more consistent net profits and profit margins than the large-scale and distant-water fishing sectors, as highlighted in Table 1.

- **Small-scale coastal fisheries (SSCF)** are the only segment where net profit grew between 2013 and 2023 (+132%). Operating subsidies increased by 74.4% over the same period, the smallest rise of the three segments.
- **Large-scale fisheries (LSF)** receive the most subsidies: operating subsidies rose by 433% between 2013 and 2023, while the sector's net profits fell by almost 245% over the same period.
- **Distant water fisheries (DWF)** show the largest subsidy increase of any segment, up 507% between 2013 and 2023, while net profit fell by 91% over the same period.

The pattern is clear: the more profitable parts of the fleet are the small-scale coastal fisheries, while the larger, more fuel-dependent segments grow ever more reliant on subsidies and deliver weaker economic returns. However, the small-scale coastal fishery is heavily dependent on local natural resource availability. When coastal fish disappear, such as in the Baltic Sea, this fleet segment becomes highly vulnerable as many vessels are not equipped to fish further offshore.

Table 1: Profit and subsidies distribution by EU fishing fleet segment. Data retrieved from CFP Evaluation report SWD (2026) (p151-155)

EU Fleet segment		Change 2013-2023
Small-scale coastal fisheries (excl. Greece)	Operating subsidies	74.4%
	Net profit	131.9%
Large-scale	Operating subsidies	433.3%
	Net profit	-244.5%
Distant Water Fleet	Operating subsidies	507.1%
	Net profit	-90.6%



c. Closing governance and implementation gaps

"[] shortcomings concerning the control, enforcement and implementation of essential EU rules [] jeopardised the long-term objectives of the CFP"¹⁹

The current CFP has strengthened governance in several ways – through greater regionalisation, wider stakeholder involvement and more adaptive and regional management.

Challenges remain, however, in adopting and implementing conservation measures effectively, as the ongoing shortcomings in the management of marine protected areas (MPAs) show. For example, a joint NGO analysis found 4.4 million hours of apparent bottom trawling within protected areas across seven European countries between 2015 and 2023²⁰. Delegated acts adopted under Article 11 of the CFP concern mainly the Baltic and North Sea basins whereas the Mediterranean or the South Western Atlantic remain unregulated when it comes to necessary fisheries regulations in Natura 2000 sites and MPAs.

Advisory Councils, created by the CFP, remain the main mechanism for stakeholder participation, and have significantly increased their output of advice. But imbalances in representation persist: other interest groups, in most cases, still fall short of the 40% membership quota. In practice, the Advisory Council system remains structurally tilted towards industry, which holds 60% of seats, while shortcomings in governance and the treatment of minority views can further limit the effective participation of environmental NGOs and other interest groups.

Scientific advice and data collection have also improved, including through wider availability of biological reference points and better collection of biological, environmental and socio-economic data. Important gaps nevertheless remain. The scientific advice requested and used by EU decision-makers must more systematically account for environmental change, climate impacts, food-web and species interactions, the natural age and size structure of fish populations, and uncertainty in stock assessments. For depleted populations, the Commission should request ICES to provide recurring scientific advice on rebuilding, including possible recovery trajectories, timeframes and the risks associated with different management choices. Governance still faces significant challenges around compliance, control and enforcement. As the evaluation puts it, "efficiency also depends strongly on how Member States implement the rules, with fragmented or uneven application reducing cost-effectiveness". Much now rests on the implementation of the revised EU Fisheries Control Regulation (FCR)²¹, which tackles several of these shortcomings through better digitalisation, vessel tracking and data management requirements, with most of its provisions becoming applicable by 2029.

Internationally, the EU has remained active in global fisheries governance – through participation in international organisations, RFMOs, Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs) and strengthened efforts to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, including the digitalisation of catch certification for imports and closer cooperation with third countries.

¹⁹ CFP evaluation report, p68.

²⁰ Marine Conservation Society (2024), A Quantification of Bottom Towed Fishing Activity in Marine Natura 2000 Sites. Marine Conservation Society. Available at: <https://europe.oceana.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2024/04/FINAL-BTG-natura-2000.pdf>.

²¹ Regulation (EU) 2023/2842 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 November 2023 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 1224/2009 and other Regulations as regards fisheries control.

2. Untapped potential of the CFP to rebuild fish populations and achieve a fair transition to low-impact fisheries

The solutions exist within the existing framework.²² The CFP has proven effective; delaying its implementation – or worse, reopening its basic text – would only set back the recovery of fish populations and the habitats they depend on. That recovery is essential to securing resilient and economically viable livelihoods for fishers over the long-term.

- **Rebuilding depleted fish populations is achievable under the existing CFP.** Sustainable, science-based fisheries management can be achieved within the CFP's existing tools. This requires the full application of the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, as required by Article 2(3) of the CFP. Fishing opportunities must be set at precautionary levels compatible with the rapid recovery of fish populations to healthy biomass levels and population structures, taking into account the wider ecosystem, such as species interactions, food-web dynamics, habitat condition, environmental changes and pressures as well as the impacts of climate change. At the same time, remedial measures must be adopted as soon as biomass falls below the key reference point (MSY Btrigger), as set out in many of the regional multiannual plans which are a key element of the CFP (Art. 9 and 10). Rebuilding trajectories can provide greater clarity and predictability by setting out a pathway for population recovery, and must complement, not replace, the CFP's existing objectives and the precautionary safeguards contained in the multiannual plans, including their legally binding limits on the risk of populations falling below critical biological limits.
- **Full implementation of the landing obligation and Fisheries Control Regulation is essential.** Accurate and independently verified data on catches, discards and fishing activity are needed both to enforce the rules and to improve scientific assessments. More selective fishing practices, effective monitoring, including remote electronic monitoring where appropriate, and measures to avoid unwanted catches are necessary to reduce fishing mortality and ensure that catch limits reflect actual removals. As an example, the enforcement of larger mesh sizes (e.g., 45 mm and 50 mm mesh) in all Spanish Mediterranean trawlers in June 2025 allowed for greater selectivity,²³ although further improvements in fishing-gear selectivity are still needed across this fleet.
- The **transition** towards low-impact fishing practices and gear remains an important untapped opportunity, alongside the phasing out of the most energy-intensive practices and the transition towards a modern, resilient, and decarbonised fishing fleet. Evidence clearly shows that existing capacity ceilings leave sufficient room for vessel modernisation and investments aimed at reducing dependence on fossil fuels, while also recognising that the available marginal capacity is not evenly distributed across all fleet segments. Crucially, support for vessel decarbonisation must be conditional on a parallel transition towards low-impact fishing practices and gear, notably a shift from towed to static gear. A decarbonisation pathway should be designed to ensure that the fisheries sector contributes to achieving the climate neutrality target by 2050.

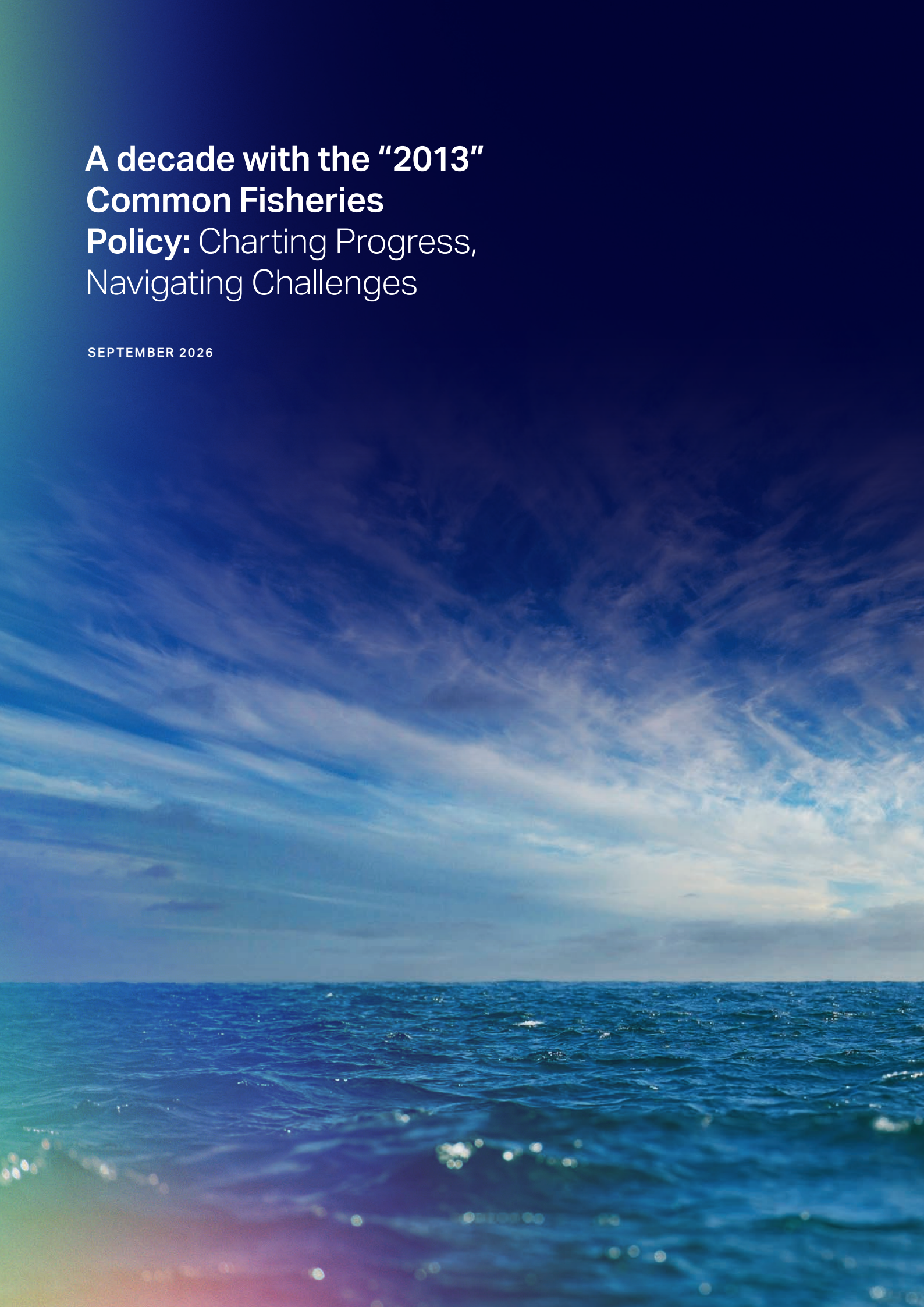
²² Environmental NGOs, Don't sink the Common Fisheries Policy – fulfil its potential, October 2025. Available here: https://www.feu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/briefing_dont-sink-the-common-fisheries-policy.pdf. A concrete implementation roadmap in ClientEarth, "CFP Implementation and Enforcement - The Simple Plan", April 2025. Available here: [CFP Implementation and Enforcement – The Simple Plan](#).

²³ Orden APA/312/2025, de 31 de marzo, por la que se modifica la Orden APA/423/2020, de 18 de mayo, por la que se establece un plan de gestión para la conservación de los recursos pesqueros demersales en el mar Mediterráneo. Available here: <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2025/04/01/pdfs/BOE-A-2025-6576.pdf>.

- **A fair standard of living for coastal fishing activities is also within reach under the CFP.** Making better use of environmental, social and economic criteria when allocating fishing opportunities, as required by Article 17 – while supporting preferential access for low-impact small-scale coastal fisheries within the 0-12 nautical mile zone in line with Articles 5 and 20 – can help deliver it. These are powerful tools to rebalance quota allocation among fishers: they enable better management of marine resources, a fairer distribution of revenue within fishing communities, recognition and reward for those who minimise their environmental impacts, and stronger territorial cohesion across European coastal regions.

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