



2024/394

24.1.2024

COUNCIL DECISION (EU) 2024/394

of 16 January 2024

on the position to be taken on behalf of the European Union in the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and repealing Decision (EU) 2019/869

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 43, in conjunction with Article 218(9) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) By Council Decision 98/416/EC ⁽¹⁾ the Union acceded the Agreement establishing the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean ('GFCM Agreement'). Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Romania, Slovenia and Spain are also Contracting Parties to the GFCM Agreement.
- (2) The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) adopts measures to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of the fishery resources and the sustainable development of aquaculture in the Area of Application of the GFCM. Such measures may become binding upon the Union.
- (3) Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council ⁽²⁾ provides that the Union is to ensure that fishing and aquaculture activities are environmentally sustainable in the long term and are managed in a way that is consistent with the objectives of achieving economic, social and employment benefits, and of contributing to the availability of food supplies. It also provides that the Union is to apply the precautionary approach to fisheries management and is to aim to ensure that exploitation of living marine biological resources restores and maintains the population of harvested species above levels which can produce the maximum sustainable yield. It further provides that the Union is to take management and conservation measures based on the best available scientific advice, to support the development of scientific knowledge and advice, to gradually eliminate discards and to promote fishing methods that contribute to more selective fishing and the avoidance and reduction, as far as possible, of unwanted catches, to fishing with low impact on marine ecosystem and fishery resources. Furthermore, Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 specifically provides that those objectives and principles are to be applied by the Union in the conduct of its external fisheries relations.
- (4) In line with the Communications from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 Bringing nature back into our lives', 'Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change' and 'A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system', it is essential to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems. Climate change and loss of biodiversity are not to jeopardise the availability of the goods and services that healthy marine ecosystems provide to fishers, coastal communities and humanity at large.
- (5) The Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy' refers to specific measures to reduce plastics and marine pollution as well as the loss or abandonment at sea of fishing gear. Furthermore, the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the

⁽¹⁾ Council Decision 98/416/EC of 16 June 1998 on the accession of the European Community to the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (OJ L 190, 4.7.1998, p. 34).

⁽²⁾ Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC (OJ L 354, 28.12.2013, p. 22).

European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'Pathway to a Healthy Planet for All EU Action Plan: Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil' aims at reducing by 50 % plastic litter at sea and by 30 % micro-plastics released into the environment.

- (6) The Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'Setting the course for a sustainable blue planet' emphasises the importance of marine biodiversity protection and conservation under the Union's external action. The Union is the most prominent actor in Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) and fisheries bodies worldwide. There, the Union promotes the sustainability of fish stocks, promotes transparent decision making based on sound scientific advice, enhances scientific research, and strengthens compliance.
- (7) As stated in the conclusions of the Ministerial Conference on the Sustainability of Mediterranean Fisheries, which adopted the Malta MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration on 30 March 2017 and of the High Level Conference on Black Sea Fisheries and Aquaculture, which adopted the Sofia Ministerial Declaration on 7 June 2018, the promotion of measures to support and enhance data collection and scientific evaluation, ecosystem-based fisheries management, a culture of compliance to eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, sustainable small scale fisheries and aquaculture, greater solidarity and coordination, is central to the Union's action in the GFCM.
- (8) The GFCM 2030 Strategy for the sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, adopted in 2021, integrates and further develops the commitments and priorities of previous Ministerial Declarations, while focusing also on actions to better address increased challenges, such as climate change, non-indigenous species, pollution in all its forms and the need to reduce and mitigate discards and incidental catches of vulnerable species.
- (9) It is appropriate to establish the position to be taken on the Union's behalf in the meetings of the GFCM for the period 2024-2028, as the GFCM conservation and management measures may be binding on the Union and capable of decisively influencing the content of Union law, namely, Council Regulations (EC) No 1005/2008 ⁽³⁾ and (EC) No 1224/2009 ⁽⁴⁾, and Regulation (EU) 2017/2403 of the European Parliament and of the Council ⁽⁵⁾.
- (10) Currently, the position to be taken on the Union's behalf in the meetings of the GFCM is established by Council Decision (EU) 2019/869 ⁽⁶⁾. It is appropriate to repeal that Decision and to replace it by a new Decision which would cover the period 2024-2028.
- (11) In view of the evolving nature of fishery resources in the Area of Application of the GFCM and the consequent need for the Union's position to take account of new developments, including new scientific and other relevant information presented before or during the meetings of the GFCM, procedures should be established, in line with the principle of sincere cooperation among the Union institutions enshrined in Article 13(2) of the Treaty on European Union, for the year-to-year specification of the Union's position for the period 2024-2028,

⁽³⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No 1005/2008 of 29 September 2008 establishing a Community system to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, amending Regulations (EEC) No 2847/93, (EC) No 1936/2001 and (EC) No 601/2004 and repealing Regulations (EC) No 1093/94 and (EC) No 1447/1999 (OJ L 286, 29.10.2008, p. 1).

⁽⁴⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No 1224/2009 of 20 November 2009 establishing a Union control system for ensuring compliance with the rules of the common fisheries policy, amending Regulations (EC) No 847/96, (EC) No 2371/2002, (EC) No 811/2004, (EC) No 768/2005, (EC) No 2115/2005, (EC) No 2166/2005, (EC) No 388/2006, (EC) No 509/2007, (EC) No 676/2007, (EC) No 1098/2007, (EC) No 1300/2008, (EC) No 1342/2008 and repealing Regulations (EEC) No 2847/93, (EC) No 1627/94 and (EC) No 1966/2006 (OJ L 343, 22.12.2009, p. 1).

⁽⁵⁾ Regulation (EU) 2017/2403 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2017 on the sustainable management of external fishing fleets, and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1006/2008 (OJ L 347, 28.12.2017, p. 81).

⁽⁶⁾ Council Decision (EU) 2019/869 of 14 May 2019 on the position to be taken on behalf of the European Union in the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), and repealing the Decision of 19 May 2014 on the position to be adopted, on behalf of the Union, in the GFCM (OJ L 140, 28.5.2019, p. 84).

HAS ADOPTED THIS DECISION:

Article 1

The position to be taken on the Union's behalf in the meetings of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) is set out in Annex I.

Article 2

The year-to-year specification of the Union's position to be taken in the meetings of the GFCM shall be conducted in accordance with Annex II.

Article 3

The Union's position set out in Annex I shall be assessed and, where appropriate, revised by the Council upon a proposal from the Commission, at the latest for the annual meeting of the GFMC in 2029.

Article 4

Decision (EU) 2019/869 is hereby repealed.

Article 5

This Decision shall enter into force on the date of its adoption.

Done at Brussels, 16 January 2024.

For the Council
The President
V. VAN PETEGHEM

ANNEX I

The position to be taken on the Union's behalf in the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

1. PRINCIPLES

In the framework of the GFCM, the Union shall:

- (a) ensure that measures adopted within the GFCM are consistent with international law, and in particular with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the 1995 UN Agreement relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, the 1993 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Agreement to promote compliance with international conservation and management measures by fishing vessels on the high seas, and the 2009 FAO Port State Measures Agreement;
- (b) aim to implement the actions and commitments set forth in the MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration signed in Malta on 30 March 2017 and in the Sofia Ministerial Declaration signed on 7 June 2018, which are intended in particular to enhance data collection and scientific evaluation, establish an ecosystem-based fisheries management framework, develop a culture of compliance and eliminating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, support sustainable small-scale fisheries and aquaculture and ensure greater solidarity and coordination in the Mediterranean;
- (c) promote the objectives of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction and at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, in particular as regards stepping up the protection of marine biodiversity and the protection of 30 % of the world's ocean through marine protected areas;
- (d) contribute to the implementation of the European Green Deal, in line with the Council Conclusions of 23 October 2020 on Biodiversity – the need for urgent action, the Council Conclusions of 10 June 2021 on Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, notably concerning the protection of nature, and with the Council Conclusions of 19 October 2020 on the Farm to Fork Strategy, and a stronger Europe in the world;
- (e) act in accordance with the objectives and principles pursued by the Union within the common fisheries policy, notably through the precautionary approach and the aims related to the maximum sustainable yield as laid down in Article 2(2) of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013, to promote the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, to avoid and reduce, as far as possible, unwanted catches, and gradually eliminate discards, and to minimise the impact of fishing activities on marine ecosystems and their habitats, as well as, through the promotion of economically viable and competitive Union fisheries, to provide a fair standard of living for those who depend on fishing activities and taking account of the interests of consumers;
- (f) be in line with the Council Conclusions of 19 March 2012 on the Commission Communication on the external dimension of the common fisheries policy;
- (g) be in line with the Council Conclusions of 13 December 2022 on International Ocean Governance for safe, secure, clean, healthy and sustainably managed oceans and seas regarding marine biodiversity conservation;
- (h) work towards an appropriate involvement of stakeholders in the preparation phase for GFCM measures and ensure that measures adopted within the GFCM are in accordance with the objectives of the GFCM Agreement;
- (i) promote positions consistent with the best practices of regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs);
- (j) seek consistency and synergy with the policy that the Union is pursuing as part of its bilateral fisheries relations with third countries, and ensure coherence with its other policies notably in the field of external relations, employment, environment, trade, development, research and innovation;

- (k) aim to create a level playing field for the Union fleet within the Area of Application of the GFCM based on the same principles and standards as those applicable under Union law, and to promote the uniform implementation of those principles and standards;
- (l) promote coordination between the GFCM, other existing RFMOs and regional sea conventions and cooperation with global organisations, as applicable, within their mandates, where appropriate;
- (m) promote cooperation mechanisms amongst non-tuna RFMOs similar to the so-called Kobe process for tuna RFMOs.

2. ORIENTATIONS

The Union shall, where appropriate, endeavour to support the adoption of the following actions by the GFCM in line with its 2030 Strategy:

- (a) measures to promote the conservation and restoration of biodiversity and to promote the sustainability of the stocks, and the integration of climate change and non-indigenous species related considerations in the decision-making process, including by integrating adequate mitigation and adaptation measures within management plans;
- (b) conservation and management measures for fisheries resources in the Area of Application of the GFCM based on the best scientific advice available, including total allowable catches and quotas or effort regulation in fisheries harvesting living marine biological resources regulated by the GFCM, which would achieve the maximum sustainable yield. Where necessary, those conservation and management measures shall include specific measures for stocks which suffer from overfishing to keep the fishing effort and capacity in line with available fishing opportunities; in the light of Article 29 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013, in the event that multi-annual plans for some stock or group of stocks in the Mediterranean have been adopted at Union level, they should be taken into account where they relate to the implementation of the objective of reaching maximum sustainable yield as laid down in Article 2(2) of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013;
- (c) measures to promote data collection, scientific research and science-based management decisions, the strengthening of its compliance committee, a culture of compliance and periodical independent performance reviews; as well as to promote better cooperation between the industry and scientists;
- (d) measures to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities in the Area of Application of the GFCM, including IUU vessel listing and cross-listing with other RFMOs, in line with the GFCM Regional Plan of Action to fight IUU fishing, and measures to promote the traceability of fish and fishery products based on the Voluntary Guidelines for Catch Documentation Schemes;
- (e) monitoring, control and surveillance measures in the Area of Application of the GFCM, in line with the GFCM Regional Plan of Action to fight IUU fishing, aiming to eliminate IUU fishing by strengthening compliance and enforcement within the GFCM;
- (f) promotion of measures aimed at a level-playing field for Union operators vis-à-vis third country operators at GFCM level, as regards the new control rules that will be implemented under the revised Union fisheries control system, such as remote electronic monitoring and control of small-scale and recreational fisheries;
- (g) measures to minimise the negative impact of fishing activities and aquaculture on marine biodiversity and marine ecosystems and their habitats, including protective measures for vulnerable marine ecosystems and essential fish habitats in the Area of Application of the GFCM in line with the GFCM Agreement and the FAO International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas, measures to avoid and reduce as far as possible unwanted catches, including in particular vulnerable marine species, and to gradually eliminate discards;
- (h) measures to reduce marine pollution and prevent the discharge of plastics at sea and reduce the impact on marine biodiversity and ecosystems of plastics present at sea, including measures to reduce the impact of Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear in the ocean and to facilitate the identification and recovery of such gear based on the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Marking of Fishing Gear;

- (i) measures aimed at the prohibition of fisheries conducted solely for the purpose of harvesting shark fins and requiring that all sharks are landed with each fin naturally attached;
 - (j) actions that promote the development of sustainable aquaculture in line with relevant Union law;
 - (k) recommendations, where appropriate and to the extent permitted under the relevant constituent documents, encouraging the implementation of the Work in Fishing Convention of the International Labour Organisation;
 - (l) common approaches with other RFMOs, where appropriate, in particular those involved in fisheries management in the same region;
 - (m) additional technical measures based on advice from the subsidiary bodies and working groups of the GFCM;
 - (n) measures in accordance with the commitments of the MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration and the Sofia Ministerial Declaration.
 - (o) measures consistent with the objectives of achieving economic, social and employment benefits, and of contributing to the availability of food supplies.
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ANNEX II

Year-to-year specification of the Union's position to be taken at meetings of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

Before each meeting of the GFCM, when that body is called upon to adopt decisions having legal effects on the Union, the necessary steps shall be taken so that the position to be expressed on the Union's behalf takes account of the latest scientific and other relevant information transmitted to the Commission, in accordance with the principles and orientations set out in Annex I.

To this effect, and based on that information, the Commission shall transmit to the Council, or to its preparatory bodies, in sufficient time before each meeting of the GFCM, a written document setting out the particulars of the proposed specification of the Union's position for discussion and endorsement of the details of the position to be expressed on the Union's behalf.

If in the course of a meeting of the GFCM it is impossible to reach an agreement, including on the spot, in order for the Union's position to take account of new elements, the matter shall be referred to the Council or its preparatory bodies.