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Commissioner for Environment
Oceans and Fisheries

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(CONAPPED)

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Dear Sirs

Thank you for the joint letter of EAPO and the French, Dutch, Danish and Swedish fishing organisations dated 7 December 2022 in which you asked about the objectives of the Commission proposal as regards a prolonged fishing closure period for eel. You also expressed your concerns about that proposal.

The objective of the Commission proposal was to further the protection of the critically endangered European eel stock while taking into account socio-economic considerations.

ICES has been advising for two decades that the eel stock is in a critical state and that all anthropogenic impacts on eel should be reduced as close as possible to zero. According to

ICES the stock situation has not improved and since 2021 ICES explicitly advises to stop all fisheries on eels at all life stages and for any purpose. Furthermore, ICES published a special advice on 30 May 2022 on the progress made in the implementation of the national eel management plans. It states that “no overall progress has been made in achieving the EU-defined biomass escapement target: the target was met or exceeded in only 23% of the reporting EMUs (as compared to 41% in the first year of reporting), and a consistently increasing trend in escapement was detected in only one EMU.” Moreover, “no clear patterns for mortalities were observed. Mortality was lower in 59% of the reporting EMUs compared to the first year of reporting, but it increased in 29% of them.” ICES also noted that there were only limited number of cases in which the situation has significantly improved. Finally, the GFCM recently decided to extend the commercial closure period to six months and to totally prohibit recreational fisheries. The EU has to transpose this decision into EU law.

Taking all these elements into account, for marine waters the Commission proposed to extend the existing closure period rather than to totally close all eel fisheries. Regarding inland waters, for which the primary competence lies with the Member States, the Commission called upon the Member States to take further action and recommended a reinforced cooperation to that effect.

The Commission proposal was discussed in the AGRIFISH Council of 11-12 December 2023 and the Council eventually decided to extend the current closure period in all relevant Union waters to six months based on the GFCM decision taken prior to the Council. This means that the Member States can choose whether the six months are consecutive or a combination of a fixed period of three months plus an additional three months period to be determined by each Member State concerned during a certain period in accordance with the eel migration patterns. Also, the flexible closure period can be different for different areas within a given Member State and for the different eel life stages so that the closures match with the migration patterns. For glass eel the rules are slightly more flexible to take account of the temporal restocking requirements and the requests by Member States to be able to continue restocking in view of contributing to rebuilding the eel stock. Finally, recreational fisheries were totally prohibited.

Furthermore, the Commission proposed a Joint Declaration on strengthening the recovery of European eel via a reinforced cooperation in stepping up efforts as regards the implementation of the eel management plans, addressing mortality factors other than fishing, restoring habitats, decreasing pollution, strengthening controls and the fight against illegal fishing and poaching. Many Member States co-signed this declaration.

Let me in the end reassure you that my services have very clearly understood your message, that there are important mortalities for eels outside fisheries. We are taking this to heart, reflected also in the Joint Declaration, and we will work with all relevant Member States to address these mortalities inland as this is crucial in the rebuilding measures for the eel stock.

Yours sincerely,



Virginijus Sinkevičius

