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European Commission Executive Vice President for the European Green Deal

**Virginijus Sinkevičius,**

European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

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**Subject: Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems: no more delays, we need actions for the Ocean now.**

Dear Executive-Vice-President, Dear Commissioner,

As members of the European Parliament working on fisheries, environmental policies and biodiversity protection, we are very much looking forward to the publication of the long awaited Commission's Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems, which is key to achieve the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 as part of the EU Green Deal, but also those of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the Common Fisheries Policy.

We are facing a biodiversity and a climate crisis and cannot afford to further delay action to protect our Ocean. The good news is that the Ocean is also at the forefront of climate action. Scientists are clear: we will not fight climate change with a depleted and barren Ocean. It is crucial that the European Commission publishes an ambitious action plan in line with the vision and duties outlined in the 2019 mission letters, containing concrete measures to conserve fisheries resources and marine ecosystems, as thriving oceans are crucial for the continuation of fisheries activities in the long term, as well as for mitigating climate change. Fishing has had the most impact on marine biodiversity in the past 50 years, according to the IPBES. That is why the EU must put an end to decades of overfishing, protect and restore marine ecosystems, and solve the issue of silo thinking of fisheries management.

The very first priorities are to ensure a full implementation of the Common Fishery Policy (CFP) objectives and EU environmental legislation by protecting sensitive species and marine habitats, especially the seabed. Such urgently needed measures should be complementary to the achievement of the maximum sustainable yield exploitation rate for all fish populations, in the EU but also worldwide, where EU fleets are operating.

In this regard, the action plan must provide tools for the implementation of the objective of protecting 30% of EU seas, including 10% of strictly protected areas and to end "Marine Paper Parks". The EU should make those objectives legally binding and set common standards of protection for both strictly-protected and regular Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Effectively protecting marine areas will contribute to climate change mitigation. The ocean absorbs more than 25% of human CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but it has in turn become 30% more acidic since the beginning of industrialisation. The seafloor acts as a carbon sink for CO<sub>2</sub> absorbed from the atmosphere, and needs to remain undisturbed to continue this function.

Globally, data show that 7% of the organic carbon is deposited on the continental shelves<sup>1</sup>, areas that are constantly disturbed by human activities. North Sea and Baltic Sea data show<sup>2</sup> that the surface sediments in these sea basins hold large amounts of deposited organic carbon, but that these areas often coincide with high bottom trawling intensity that leads to resuspension of carbon into the water column<sup>3</sup>. Taking into account the current trajectory of anthropogenic atmospheric emissions and the alarming pace of biodiversity loss, marine and coastal ecosystems must be protected both for their environmental and climate benefits. In particular, the EU must launch and fund scientific research programmes to map carbon-rich marine habitats and protect them from human activities that could disturb and release carbon into the water column, such as bottom-contacting fishing operations.

In its most recent resolution on a sustainable blue economy, the European Parliament has called for the tackling of the detrimental impacts on the climate, seabed integrity, fish populations and sensitive species of fishing techniques such as bottom-contacting gear, drift nets, demersal seines or fish aggregating devices, including by limiting their use. It has especially called for the prohibition of all environmentally damaging extractive industrial activities including mining and fossil fuel extraction in marine protected areas. Expanding the current network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) without improving their level of protection and tackling concretely the negative impacts of the most harmful fishing techniques would not help deliver the EU Green Deal. Bottom trawling should be prohibited in all EU MPAs, as demanded by 150.000 EU citizens.

The protection of marine ecosystems can be an opportunity for the fisheries sector to transition towards low-impact fisheries. In addition to restrictive measures, we believe the Commission must work with Member States to provide incentives, not only via the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), but also via the allocation of fishing quota to fishers who have a low impact or are reducing their impact on the environment, following Article 17 of the CFP. Structural changes are also needed in order to protect the rights of small-scale fishers in the EU from all over the world to access the marine resources they depend on for their livelihoods.

The Commission must also find ways to overcome the shortcomings of the current tools, especially in the Common Fisheries Policy, which makes the adoption of conservation measures very hard and allows individual Member states to block the adoption of conservation measures. The ban on the use of demersal seines in the Channel is a good example of a measure that is supported both by the local fishers and by environmental NGOs but is not being implemented yet because of these shortcomings. There is also an urgent need for more concrete measures on the selectivity of fishing techniques, on preventing bycatch of sensitive species and reducing the catches of juvenile fish. Shortcomings in the implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation have been identified.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunne et al., 2007. A synthesis of global particle export from the surface ocean and cycling through the ocean interior and on the seafloor.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228366382\\_A\\_synthesis\\_of\\_global\\_particle\\_export\\_from\\_the\\_surface\\_ocean\\_and\\_cycling\\_through\\_the\\_ocean\\_interior\\_and\\_on\\_the\\_seafloor](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228366382_A_synthesis_of_global_particle_export_from_the_surface_ocean_and_cycling_through_the_ocean_interior_and_on_the_seafloor)

<sup>2</sup> Diesing et al., 2021. Organic carbon densities and accumulation rates in surface sediments of the North Sea and Skagerrak. <https://bg.copernicus.org/articles/18/2139/2021/> ; Leipe et al., 2011. Particulate organic carbon (POC) in surface sediments of the Baltic Sea ;  
[https://www.academia.edu/1881249/Particulate\\_organic\\_carbon\\_POC\\_in\\_surface\\_sediments\\_of\\_the\\_Baltic\\_Sea](https://www.academia.edu/1881249/Particulate_organic_carbon_POC_in_surface_sediments_of_the_Baltic_Sea) ; Scheffold and Hense, 2020. Quantifying Contemporary Organic Carbon Stocks of the Baltic Sea Ecosystem.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2020.571956/full>

<sup>3</sup> Eigaard et al., 2017. The footprint of bottom trawling in European waters: Distribution, intensity, and seabed integrity. <https://research.wur.nl/en/publications/the-footprint-of-bottom-trawling-in-european-waters-distribution-> ; Oberle et al., 2016. What a drag: Quantifying the global impact of chronic bottom trawling on continental shelf sediment.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288931962\\_What\\_a\\_drag\\_Quantifying\\_the\\_global\\_impact\\_of\\_chronic\\_bottom\\_trawling\\_on\\_continental\\_shelf\\_sediment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288931962_What_a_drag_Quantifying_the_global_impact_of_chronic_bottom_trawling_on_continental_shelf_sediment)

As Members of the European Parliament, we count on the Commission to deliver on the objectives established in the EU biodiversity and look forward to the publication of an ambitious Action Plan.

Yours sincerely,

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