

High Level Conference on Black Sea fisheries and aquaculture

Sofia, 7 June 2018

SOFIA MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

Preamble

1. We, Ministers, Heads of national delegations and the European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, have met in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 7 June 2018 to strengthen governance and regional cooperation, and to foster the environmental, economic and social sustainability of Black Sea fisheries and aquaculture;
2. Black Sea fisheries are traditional activities, supporting livelihoods and local economies of coastal communities, providing high quality food and income to fishers in the riparian countries, and thereby contributing to the socioeconomic viability of the Black Sea coastal area. At least 9 500 fishing vessels are operating in the Black Sea belonging to the fleets of Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine. Black Sea capture fisheries directly support the employment of about 23 500 persons, with many more jobs indirectly dependent on the fishing sector. In the same countries, an estimated 8,700 aquaculture farms, marine and freshwater, generate direct and indirect jobs to more than 39 000 people;
3. Almost two years after the 2016 Bucharest Ministerial declaration towards enhanced cooperation on Black Sea fisheries and aquaculture, we are standing once again at a historic juncture with regard to the sustainability of living marine resources and the wellbeing of coastal communities. The Bucharest declaration has set strong commitments for common and collaborative actions towards sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, including supporting small-scale fisheries, enhancing data collection, improving scientific advice, strengthening compliance towards fighting against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) and responsibly developing aquaculture;
4. However, despite progress in the implementation of the Bucharest declaration and common efforts, a considerable number of the scientifically assessed stocks are being fished beyond safe biological limits. As a result, the future of fisheries in the Black Sea is at stake, putting increasing pressure on our fishers as sub-optimal yields become an increasing threat to income and employment, and further jeopardising the stability of food security and supply;
5. Recognising severe threats to these living marine resources from overfishing, IUU fishing, incidental catches, discarding practices and ghost fishing;
6. Supporting FAO efforts in promoting responsible fisheries and sustainable aquaculture practices in the context of the Blue Growth Initiative;
7. Encouraging broad participation in the 2009 "Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing", including the ratification by Black Sea riparian countries and its subsequent implementation in compliance with their flag State responsibilities;

8. Supporting full participation in the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) and the implementation of its Regional Plan of Action (RPoA) to combat IUU fishing in the GFCM area of application, including the Black Sea;
9. Acknowledging the “Mid-term Strategy (2017-2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries” which adapts the targets in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 to 'Conserve and sustainably use the ocean, seas and marine resources for sustainable development' and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets to the specificities of the Black Sea region;
10. Acknowledging the GFCM Strategy for the sustainable development of Mediterranean and Black Sea aquaculture, which envisages a future for aquaculture where a level playing field is achieved and the promotion of the sector ensures an industry that is economically and environmentally sustainable and socially and culturally responsible, with a view to making the industry more competitive, sustainable, productive, profitable and equitable;
11. Recognising that although effort has been made to support aquaculture development, additional effort is needed in terms of technical cooperation and knowledge-sharing to unlock the potentialities of the sector, taking into account the differences in the region and the growing expectations of the countries;
12. Taking into account the significant work of the GFCM on small-scale fisheries, to set up a Regional Plan of Action for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, on the basis of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small Scale Fisheries;
13. Taking into account the environmental specificities of the Black Sea which, as an enclosed sea basin, is different from other sea basins in terms of natural environmental conditions, with less salinity and over 90 percent of its deeper water volume consisting of anoxic water, affecting the biodiversity within the Black Sea;
14. Noting that increasing pressures are exerted on Black Sea marine ecosystems by a variety of human activities which include unsustainable fishing practices, as well as transport, intense maritime traffic, coastal urbanisations and unplanned development of coastal zones, agriculture and industry oriented pollution, climate change and invasive species;
15. In the light of the humanitarian challenges faced globally and in the Black Sea, securing fishery resources is a major leverage to preserve the livelihoods of coastal communities, especially the most fragile ones, and contribute to set the conditions for stabilisation and fruitful international cooperation in the region;
16. Recognising, in the spirit of solidarity in the Black Sea, that we have a shared responsibility to ensure the biological, social and economic sustainability of Black Sea fishery resources for present and future generations and thus to take responsible management, conservation and control measures;

We agree to strengthen governance for Black Sea fisheries based on the following objectives and principles

17. Develop a comprehensive and holistic regional governance involving all stakeholders and empowering fishers, especially within small-scale fleets, to take direct responsibility in the participative management of fisheries, building on the existing common understanding and on traditional specificities in the Black Sea;
18. Highlight the central role of the Food and Agriculture Organization through its General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean to support ongoing regional cooperation for the sustainable development of both fisheries and aquaculture among coastal States, Contracting Parties and Cooperating non-Contracting Parties to the GFCM;
19. Achieve exploitation at Maximum Sustainable Yield to preserve food security, artisanal and subsistence fisheries and the socioeconomic role of fisheries, in line with the Johannesburg Declaration on sustainable development and Sustainable Development Goal 14 to 'Conserve and sustainably use the ocean, seas and marine resources for sustainable development';
20. Build on the applicable national and international rules to establish a comprehensive culture of compliance in the Black Sea based on transparency, shared responsibility, cross-border cooperation as well as efficient prevention, detection and action to ensure a rule-based management of fisheries and a level playing field across the sea basin;
21. Ensuring adequate data collection and exchange of data on all commercial fish stocks and all types of fleets including small-scale and recreational fisheries to reinforce scientific knowledge on fish stocks and ecosystems;
22. Further ensuring adequate collection on socio-economic fisheries-related data to support the decision making on management solutions and their impacts, to further integrate the socio-economic dimension in fisheries management;
23. Noting the important role of small-scale fisheries in the Black Sea, representing at least 90 percent of the total fishing vessels in the area and further recognizing that small-scale as well as recreational fisheries must play an increased role in contributing to data collection and collective research efforts;
24. Recognizing that small-scale fisheries in the Black Sea are rooted in local coastal communities, traditions, cultural heritage and values, defining the characteristic identity of the region and playing a key role in social inclusion, cohesion, and food security. Further to that, small-scale fisheries create notable added value for local development, social and environmental sustainability, by creating products with short value chains, providing consumers with high quality and variety of fish, and by generally being perceived to have a lower environmental impact;
25. Encouraging fair and balanced distribution of fishing opportunities between small-scale and larger fleets, especially where fleet interoperability exists for different high-value iconic fish stocks, giving due consideration to low impact methods as well as other environmental, social and economic criteria;
26. Improving working conditions and promoting the role of women in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors and supporting young people experiencing difficulties in accessing the labour market;
27. Developing fisheries management in the framework of a comprehensive eco-systemic approach, in order to strive towards the gradual elimination, on a case by case basis, of discards, bycatch and

incidental catch of vulnerable species, as well as to enhance the protection of sensitive habitats and address the effects of pollution and other external factors on fisheries. In this respect, implement and promote well-managed marine protected areas, as appropriate to ensure complementarity between objectives for biodiversity protection and sustainable fisheries;

28. Devising and considering appropriate incentives for small-scale and recreational fisheries to play a more active role to meet environmental objectives for healthy marine ecosystems and resilient living marine resources;
29. Increasing the profitability and value chain of fishery products whilst ensuring food security, in line with the FAO strategic objectives;
30. Taking into account Our Ocean 2017 commitments on marine pollution, marine protected areas, maritime security, sustainable blue economy, sustainable fisheries and climate change, towards ensuring a future for safe, secure and healthy oceans;
31. Investing in the sustainable development of the blue economy as a new attractive alternative for fisheries under increasing pressure;
32. Taking into account the potential of aquaculture as a major source of food and income for the Black Sea communities. Further sustainable development of aquaculture will boost synergies and interactions between maritime sectors and development of the blue economy in the Black Sea;
33. Seeking a comprehensive approach to promote sustainable fisheries, food security and economic diversification towards sustainable blue economy in coastal communities, in particular by encouraging coordinated actions through the existing cooperation frameworks in the Black Sea, both at political and technical levels;

We urge all riparian States to

34. Become Contracting Parties to the GFCM, where appropriate, and comply with the management measures adopted by the GFCM, including its RPoA to combat IUU fishing and fully implement the GFCM mid-term strategy for 2017-2020 towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black sea fisheries;
35. Ensure the implementation of the GFCM strategy for the sustainable development of Mediterranean and Black Sea aquaculture;
36. Ratify and implement the FAO agreement on Port State measures to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing;
37. Ensure an effective implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as the COP 22 Marrakech proclamations;
38. Strengthen solidarity across the Black Sea basin to address the needs of coastal States and provide them with technical, scientific and financial support to improve their administrative capability, making the best use of existing international, regional and bilateral funding mechanisms to develop their sustainable use of marine resources, in particular through the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and the European External Investment Plan;

39. Cooperate to establish fisheries restricted and marine protected areas in the sea basin without prejudice to the sovereign rights of States and in accordance with relevant international law;

We attach importance to the following actions

A) Enhance data collection and scientific evaluation

40. Ensuring proper data collection and enhancing the knowledge on stocks are of utmost importance to achieve sustainable management of stocks on the basis of the work of the Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS) and taking into account the BlackSea4Fish project. To this aim, we:
41. Will ensure that the key Black Sea stocks are subject to adequate data collection and scientifically assessed on a regular basis, as foreseen by the GFCM based on the recommendations made by the Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS), taking into account the impact of recreational fisheries and external factors such as pollution. We ask the GFCM to prepare a progressive calendar to achieve this target;
42. Will follow the 2018 GFCM Forum on Fisheries Science aiming at ensuring an effective unity of action of scientific activities through effective coordination of stock assessments, common guidelines on data collection and stocks assessment methodologies to ensure reproducibility and data quality as well as data exchange on a need-to-share basis, taking into account relevant data protection requirements. We ask the regional Forum on Fisheries Science to submit to the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries – Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS) a proposal for common working rules implementing the abovementioned objectives, to be then submitted to the GFCM annual session;
43. Supporting full implementation of GFCM BlackSea4Fish project to take benefit of targeted and specific technical activities, ensuring and complementing the provision of scientific advice in support of management decisions for Black Sea fisheries;

B) Establish an ecosystem-based fisheries management

44. Existing management measures will be complemented and expanded to progressively achieve exploitation at maximum sustainable yield. To this end, we undertake to:
45. As soon as possible make efforts to establish a capacity plan ensuring an adequate balance between resources and the fleet capacity in the Black Sea riparian States;
46. As soon as possible manage the key fisheries with a multi-annual management plan in order to restore and maintain the populations of fish stocks above fishing mortality levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield, on the basis of the work of the Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS) and taking into account the BlackSea4Fish project. We ask the GFCM to agree on the list of key fisheries for which a multi-annual management plan should be implemented;
47. Ensure adequate protection of vulnerable species and sensitive habitats, with a specific attention to cetaceans, seabirds and seagrass habitats, including in marine protected areas, without prejudice to the sovereign rights of States and in accordance with relevant international law, designated for their conservation, through inter alia specific fisheries management measures embedded in multiannual management plans;

48. Endeavour to further develop fisheries restricted and marine protected areas ensuring an effective protection of at least 10 percent of the Black Sea, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development goal 14.5 and Aichi Biodiversity Target 11. We call upon GFCM contracting parties and the Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS) to present to the GFCM annual session proposals for the development of new fisheries restricted areas, in particular to establish a consistent network of essential fish habitats, following a thorough consultation process, without prejudice to the sovereign rights of States and in accordance with relevant international law. We invite the GFCM to agree on a progressive calendar with quantified objectives to achieve this target;
49. Establish, as soon as possible a set of baseline rules to ensure an effective management of recreational fisheries across the Black Sea, based on the work made by the Working Group on the Black Sea (WGBS). This common base will be further complemented by additional measures in multiannual management plans when relevant;

C) Develop a culture of compliance and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

50. The fight against IUU fishing must be effectively reinforced through the efficient and responsible action of flag States in coordination with coastal, port and market States to ensure an effective level playing field across the Black Sea. To achieve this result, we will:
51. Ensure that as soon as possible, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14.4 all States have an adequate legal framework and the necessary human and technical capabilities to meet their control and inspection responsibilities, within the Exclusive Economic Zone of each riparian State, as flag, coastal and port States. To this end, we ask GFCM to support the development of national control and sanctioning systems, upon request of the Black Sea riparian States, including the training of inspectors, the implementation of modular solutions for monitoring, control and surveillance and the continuation of the operationalization of a regional VMS and control system, including through technical assistance to riparian countries in the frame of the GFCM regional plan of action against IUU fishing;
52. Develop and establish in the context of GFCM multi-annual management plans, as soon as possible and where it is appropriate, pilot schemes to then be developed, if considered appropriate, into permanent voluntary Joint Schemes of International Inspection, upon request of Black Sea riparian States, to ensure the monitoring of regional areas subject to IUU fishing;
53. We invite the GFCM through its Compliance Committee to carry out regular quantification of IUU fishing in the Black Sea, based on the common methodology to assess IUU fishing and the harmonization of existing measures to fight against IUU fishing;
54. By 2021, ensure the allocation of a unique vessel identifier (IMO number) to commercial fishing vessels of 24 meters and above¹, in line with the applicable international rules;
55. Launch targeted campaigns across the Black Sea to raise awareness of the public and consumers and to disseminate information and facts of the main problems associated with IUU fishing;

¹With the exemption of wooden vessels

D) Support sustainable small-scale fisheries and aquaculture

56. The sustainable development of aquaculture should be strongly supported to contribute to food security in the Black Sea and to strengthen coastal economies. To this end, we intend, as from 2018, to implement the GFCM Strategy for the sustainable development of Mediterranean and Black Sea aquaculture which will support, inter alia, farming of food fish products, market access and trade, thereby creating economic benefits, employment opportunities and reducing the current stress on marine capture fisheries;
57. Commit to implement by 2020 at the latest the technical recommendations of the Panel 3 "Current state and future perspectives for the responsible development of aquaculture in the Black Sea", as included in the Bucharest declaration. It is of high importance to boost the sustainable and responsible development of aquaculture in the Black Sea region, based on an ad hoc approach which takes into consideration the particular features of the region and addresses the varying environmental, governance, economic and social needs of the sector and common challenges hampering uneven development;
58. Support partnerships between producers and the marketing chain to enhance the valorisation of catches with a balanced distribution of profits, in particular those resulting from selective and low-impact fishing techniques;
59. Commit to cooperate in the implementation of the activities of the Aquaculture Demonstrative Centre (ADC) in the Black Sea, based on regional cooperation and showcasing the different production methods for both shellfish and fish farming. The full operationalisation of ADC would benefit the riparian countries and would be instrumental in implementing effective knowledge-sharing and dissemination of marine aquaculture best practices;

E) Greater solidarity and coordination in the Black Sea

60. A permanent network for cooperation, technical assistance and consultation on the implementation of the Sofia Declaration will be established within GFCM by the end of 2019, taking into consideration existing projects, such as the BlackSea4Fish project, to ensure an optimal coordination of the actions undertaken to develop the scientific and administrative capabilities of riparian countries, including monitoring and inspection. To this end all participants will indicate a focal point for this Black Sea network;
61. We call upon the GFCM to present a work programme on spatial planning with a pre-identification of priority areas during its 2019 annual session. This work programme should take into account the result of consultations with riparian countries and relevant regional organisations and instruments;
62. We invite all relevant regional organizations and instruments competent for the environmental, economic and social sustainability in the Black Sea to cooperate in an efficient and effective manner, in order to avoid duplications and promote synergies;
63. We promote the effective implementation of GFCM BlackSea4Fish project for the technical needs across Black Sea basin;

Follow-up of the declaration

64. We invite the GFCM to steer and coordinate actions to ensure the implementation of the declaration, and to provide an annual report on the implementation of the actions set forth in this declaration, reflecting the reports provided by riparian countries when relevant;
65. We invite the GFCM to present, as soon as possible, a progressive, coherent and applicable calendar, with yearly quantified targets to achieve the objectives of the declaration, in line with the mid-term strategy (2017-2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and the Black Sea fisheries, for the Black Sea.

Signed in Sofia, on 7 June 2018, in two original copies in English.



Karmenu Vella

EU Commissioner for Environment, Maritime
Affairs and Fisheries, on behalf of the
European Union



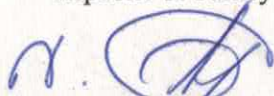
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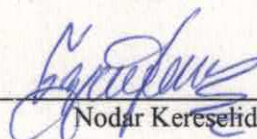
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