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Press Statement by Commissioner Sinkevičius at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council

Brussels, 29 June 2020

*Speech by Commissioner **Sinkevičius**, in charge of Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council*

Dear colleagues,

Today I have presented to the EU fisheries ministers the Commission's Communication on the progress towards more sustainable fishing in the EU, and on the main orientations that will shape the Commission's proposals on fishing opportunities for 2021. Member States, advisory councils, stakeholders and the public are now invited to reflect on the policy orientations set out in this Communication and to provide feedback to the Commission in a public consultation, which will be open by 31 August 2020.

Today my message to Member States was two-fold.

First of all, we have achieved a lot over the last decade. The positive impact of the common fisheries policy on our marine environment is undisputable, thanks to the efforts of our fishermen and women. In the North-East Atlantic, 99% of the stocks only managed by the EU are now caught within sustainability limits, so-called maximum sustainable yield (MSY).

This proves that when we all play our role and take responsibility, together we can achieve great results. Moreover, sustainability is an important part of business. The recovery of the stocks at the same time has led to record profits for the sector. This is a clear win-win situation. The conclusion presented in the report relate of course to data from 2018 and therefore do not reflect the challenging situation for the sector caused this year by the COVID-19 crisis and the cod crisis in the Baltic Sea which lead to the closure of targeted Eastern cod fishery since mid-last year.

Secondly, I expressed my sincere thanks for the outstanding cooperation with Member States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to very fast and ambitious decision-making, we succeeded to avoid a worst-case scenario, and we are now on the road to recovery. This recovery must be a green, or better blue, recovery, and there is strong potential for fisheries and the blue economy to "bounce forward" and become a driver of the necessary sustainable transformation.

At the same time, I also shared my concerns today. Concerns over the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where progress toward sustainable fisheries has been far too slow. Concerns over insufficient implementation of the landing obligation. Member States have had many years to prepare. We have developed flexibility mechanisms. We provide support through the EMFF, or European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. But we see that this flexibility and funds are rarely used. It's time. We must implement what we have all agreed to, years ago.

I also reiterated my concern about the ongoing negotiations on the EMFF for the next financial period. In particular on the issues of subsidies that could contribute to overcapacity and overfishing. Such subsidies work against our objective of healthy EU fish stocks and against our international commitments. The Commission urges the co-legislators to accelerate the negotiations and come to a swift and ambitious conclusion. It is in the interest of our fishing and coastal communities who will need a robust EMFF, without harmful subsidies. Not least to support a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

I also had the chance to remind Member States that 2020, this year, is the year when fish stocks must be managed in line with the maximum sustainable yield target. This will not be easy, but it is our legal obligation, and we must live up to it – certainly for stocks managed by the EU alone. Our proposals on fishing opportunities, which we will adopt in autumn, will reflect that ambition, that shared legal commitment. I look forward to continue working with Member States and with the upcoming German Presidency to achieve sustainable fisheries and a thriving sector in Europe.

Finally, I informed Member States about my recent roundtable discussion on the prevention of bycatches of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay and harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea. I am personally very concerned about the impact of bycatch and other pressures on protected sea animals. I reiterated my call on Member States to urgently take the necessary measures required by EU fisheries and environmental legislation. I underlined that the Commission prefers solutions to be found jointly by all Member States involved, but that I stand ready to take further action, if necessary.

Finally, I would like to thank the Croatian Presidency for working together on these and other unexpected challenges, such as the coronavirus crisis. And now I am looking forward to continue working on these issues with the German Presidency.

Thank you for your attention. Now I am ready to answer your questions.

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