

Closure of nearly 100 fishing areas: EBFA sounds the alarm

- The European Commission, despite the opposition from relevant Member States and without backing of the Council, can unilaterally approve the closure of 94 areas to bottom fishing.
- This implementing act violates the basic rules of consultation and public debate.
- With this decision, the future of bottom fishing in the Atlantic and therefore of more than 10,000 fishermen is at stake.

Paris, June 28, 2022 – The European Bottom Fishing Alliance, which represents more than 20,000 sea fishermen and 7,000 European vessels, denounces the implementing act for the regulation on access to waters depths¹ submitted by the European Commission to the Council of the European Union.

This implementing act bans all bottom fishing activities (trawling, longlining, hooks etc.) in 94 fishing areas in France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. The consequences will be dramatic for all European fisheries.

In view of the recognized scientific gaps, lack of proper consultation, lack of comprehensive socio-economic impact assessment and lack of endorsement from the Council, the EBFA requests the withdrawal of the implementing act.

The Commission, left alone

During the vote in the European Council of Ministers this morning, many Member States – some of which were not even directly affected by this implementing act – decided to abstain in protest against the lack of proper consultation in the process and weakness of the impact assessments and accompanying this potential decision. The Council's vote resulted in the absence of a qualified majority in favor or against the text (an extremely rare occurrence in European legislative procedures). Now, the Commission must decide unilaterally on the fate of this implementing act.

In view of the reservations expressed by the Member States, it would be particularly surprising to see the Commission force its way through.

Worst case-scenario proposal

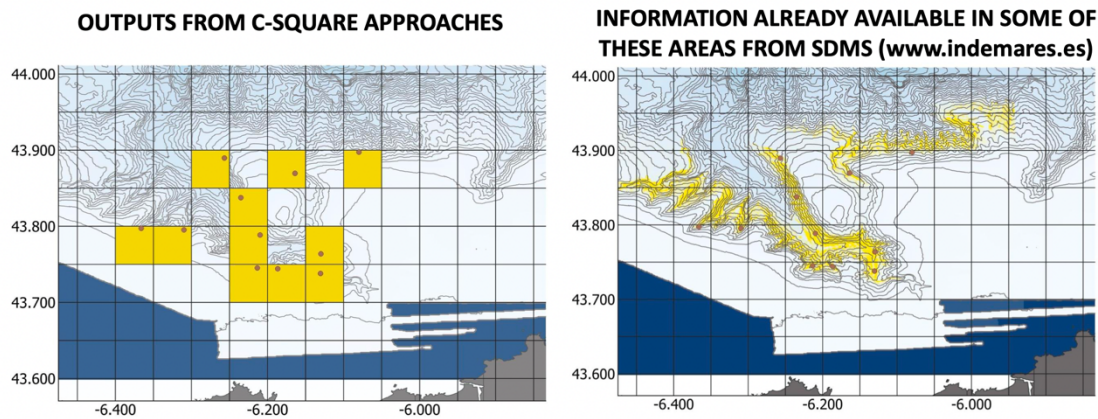
Out of the four possible scenarios proposed by scientists, the Commission chose the most restrictive, proposing to close to fishing entire traditional fishing grounds. Furthermore, scientists recognized that the obsolete mapping capability used in the scientific advice can overestimate the proportion of the seabed where both fishing occurs and VME's are present¹. Yet there is no public commitment nor ambition from the Commission to solve this long-lasting issue. These limitations did not stop the Commission to shut down entire fishing areas even if VMEs do not exist or only exist in a fraction thereof neglecting and amplifying the huge socio-economic consequences for fishermen and food security.

The Commission disregarded even the possibility of including areas where the existence of VMEs has been better determined and mapped. In the inset below, ²we can see such an example. This information seems of no interest to the Commission even though the science comes from an EU-funded project that aims to better protect biodiversity (LIFE programme) which counted with

¹ ICES uses as a base unit a C-SQUARE of about 15-25 km² per cell, which does not represent the actual footprint of a fishing vessel.

² Chart from the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) and the Spanish Oceanographic Institute (IEO).

the participation of stakeholders, including the fishing fleet. Additionally, the implementing act will introduce buffer zones that triple the surface of the closed areas where vulnerable ecosystems exist without a clear justification of their need.



Other fishing gears, such as long-liners or hooks, whose impacts, be it environmental or socioeconomic, were not studied, will also be affected by the closures in a very disproportionate manner. Therefore, these fishing vessels will be forced to move from their traditional fishing grounds to other areas where the target species might not exist, which will certainly disrupt fishing operations and reduce their quota. Some of these fleets will be affected by these closures up to 75% of their current catches without any prior socio-economic impact assessment.

A rushed process without proper consultation

The EBFA is surprised that the European Commission has not carried out a proper consultation process worthy of the name with all the stakeholders. Conversations and meetings have been held in a loose manner through the past years, but never was there a chance for the industry to properly evaluate the concrete proposal tabled only 14 days ago. The sector is the most interested in giving useful feedback, based on data and science, but that needs some time to achieve, just like it took six years for the Commission to make this proposal.

EBFA fails to understand why the Commission decided to go for the shortest delay possible from proposal to voting, two weeks, when they could have provided more time for affected fleets and Member States to study and propose changes to the plan. Certainly, the Commission is not able to live up to the transparency and open debate standards that it so much demands from others.

Ivan Lopez van der Veen, President of EBFA, declared *"We are fully aware that our activity impacts the environment, just like any food producing system. We also understand and support the need to close areas where vulnerable ecosystems exist as part of a better protection of the Ocean. Unfortunately, this is not the case in this implementation. Traditional fishing grounds are closed to fishing beyond a real need, just to reach political targets with no real benefit for nature and with huge consequences for fishermen and food security."*

Mr López concluded *"The Commission advocates a co-management system that when it comes to their own decisions, sadly does not apply in practice. Instead we are portrayed as reactionaries when all we want is effective management and protection, based on reality and not on a goal of who closes more square km of the sea to fishing. It is even more painful to experience when one sees the aloofness of the same Commission when it comes to Deep Sea Mining, an activity that seems perfectly OK to Brussels."*

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