

PECH Committee 28th March 2023

Public hearing "Marine pollution (in particular plastic pollution) and its impact on fisheries".

14:30 – 18:30

PECH held a public hearing entitled "Marine pollution (in particular plastic pollution) and its impact on fisheries".

Background¹: Plastic from different sources is ending up in our oceans at alarming rates, impacting fish stocks and the fishing sector, with consequences on the health of stocks and on the quality of the product. Plastic pollution has become a major threat to marine environment and to the sustainability of fisheries. Fishers are directly impacted by plastic pollution and have an immediate interest in contributing to address this problem. A holistic approach requires understanding the causes and finding solutions, by fully involving the sector, stakeholders and policy makers. This hearing aims at understanding the complexities of plastic pollution from the perspective of fisheries: What has been done so far to reduce the plastic pollution's impact on fisheries? How can fishers contribute to tackling this problem? How to enforce or improve existing regulations?

Mr Pierre Karleskind, PECH Chair chaired the meeting.

Ms Veronika Hunt Safrankova, Head of Brussels Office of the United Nations Environment Programme referred the COP15 biodiversity goals referring to the 2030 pledge to protect 30% of marine waters. She mentioned the historical High Seas Treaty, which also brought waters to the political agenda. A shift to circular economy can reduce plastic pollution. Every UN Environment Assembly addresses marine litter. In February 2022, there was a commitment to prepare a global treaty on plastic pollution. Flexibility is needed in implementing the commitments related to plastic pollution. There is also a need for good science. We must focus on plastic economy, innovate the space, everything needs to be informed by science. Plastic pollution is part of marine pollution package.

Ms Veronica Manfredi, Director DG ENV, European Commission referred to the fact that 80% marine areas are impacted by chemical pollution and 70% by plastic pollution. Despite positive developments, the seas are not generally in good condition. Marine pollution impacts marine activities. Marine litter harms fish and seafood through entanglements and indigestion. 91% of areas are exposed to excessive noise. We call for 0% plastic pollution in the seas. The 2030 target is to reduce by 50% plastic litter, 50% chemical pollution and nutrient losses. Marine Strategy Framework Directive – commitments to achieve good environmental state by 2020 have not been reached. It is of utmost importance to prevent pollution at source, but also to conduct activities to fight pollution in the water. Monitoring of

¹ From agenda of the meeting

chemical pollution in rivers is carried out. There are many legislative acts related to plastic litter, such as the Single Use Plastic Directive which limits the use of plastic. Port Reception Facilities Directive aims at improving waste systems. In 2014-2020, the EMFF had supported 108 actions to remove litter from sea in the European seas (removal of lost nets among others). Pollution can now be recognised as a criminal offence – penalties are proposed to secure better implementation of polluter pays principle. Global actions are carried out, not only in the EU, towards eliminating plastic pollution. The amount of plastic litter has decreased in recent years, but better data is needed to assess progress.

Part I: What is the impact of marine pollution on fish stocks and fisheries?

Prof. Pero Tutman, Institute of Oceanography and fisheries, Split (IOF), Laboratory of ichthyology and coastal fisheries

Marine litter is a global problem. It is one of the main problems for the environment and has huge impact on fisheries. Most of marine litter is produced on land. Part of the problem relates to lost nets. Marine animals get entangled in lost gears. There are activities in the Netherlands and Belgium called Fishing for Litter, that include close collaboration with fishermen. These actions have two main objectives: removal of litter from marine environment and raising environmental awareness with regard to marine litter. Also some similar actions to remove lost nets are carried out in Croatia. Ghost nets exert pressure on the environment. Gears are lost as a result of weather conditions and continue catching for a long time after their loss. Lost gears are the most destructive form of marine litter and account for 10% of all marine litter. We should start considering lost gears as marine litter. Problem of lost gears occurs in all the EU seas. Actions funded by the EU are conducted in the EU.

Ms Elena Ghezzi, Legacoop Agroalimentare, presented the problem of marine pollution. She explained what is meant under the ecosystem approach – it is to maintain a healthy, productive and resilient ecosystem so it can provide human beings with the goods and services they want. Marine pollution has cumulative impact on various sectors. Lost nets are part of marine pollution, make damage to engines and to fish. How to fight plastic pollution? There are two ways: through preventive actions and physical actions to remove litter. Prevention strategies should be based on ecosystem based approach. Fishers play important role in physical actions to remove litter.

Part II: A systemic approach to tackling marine pollution & innovative solutions

Mr João Ribeiro-Bidaoui, The Ocean Cleanup

Plastic pollution is one of the greatest threats of today. To solve the problem, we need to understand it. Rivers are the arteries that carry litter to the sea. There are good news – only 0.25% of plastic enters the oceans. To solve the problem, we need to improve waste management.

Ms Frédérique Mongodin, Senior Marine Litter Policy Officer, Seas at Risk Q&A

Lost fishing gears have huge impact on the ecosystem. It is a cross-border issue. It is debated at international level, in the UN and FAO. The contribution of the fishing sector to recovering marine litter is considerable. Solutions were mentioned: cleaning actions,

biodegradable gears, plastic recycling (greenwashing), tracking solutions (not all are cost effective). Different initiatives, including paying fishers for bringing lost nets ashore. Fishers are also asked to test biodegradable nets. Lost nets are harmless if they are collected.

Discussion: An MEP from France referred to the fact that several speakers said that actions are taken in close collaboration with the fishing community. He asked what are the arguments the fishers bring? How can good practices be spread? Another MEP from France praised the cleaning actions conducted at sea. How can we improve the implementation of polluter pays principle? Luckily export of marine litter to third countries has stopped. A German MEP asked how to prevent ghost nets? Pilot projects are not enough. We should make sure where the nets come from, make their identification possible. He noted that microplastics cannot be removed. And these gears disintegrate into microplastics. He had heard bad things on biodegradable nets that only fall into smaller particles. More research is needed on biodegradable nets. An MEP from Spain referred to the circular economy. We cannot deny that marine litter is harmful to fisheries. An MEP from Portugal underlined that cigarette butts are a real problem on the beaches. An MEP from Ireland stated that marine litter is of utmost importance for the PECH Committee. She talked about prevention (better than cure) and highlighted that litter is a driver of climate change.