

## EFARO<sup>1</sup> webinar: The future of the bottom trawl

31<sup>st</sup> March 2023

10:00 – 12:00

Online

### Introduction:

Currently there is a European wide debate to halt the destructive impacts of bottom trawling, a method of fishing that involves dragging heavy weighted nets across the sea floor in an effort to catch fish. On February 21<sup>st</sup> the Commission launched the “EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries, COM/2023/102”. The plan points out where action is needed to address the by-catch of sensitive species and adverse impacts on sensitive habitats through technical measures such as area closures, gear changes and mitigation measures for sensitive species. It contributes to one of the main objectives of the European Green Deal, in making fisheries more sustainable, protecting marine ecosystems and their biodiversity. Under the draft plan, bottom trawling would be banned in Marine Protected Areas by 2030 but would still be allowed outside of those.

### Speakers

**Jan Geert Hiddink**, from the School of Ocean Sciences at the University of Bangor. His research broadly examines the effect of human disturbance on benthic ecosystems, including fishing and climate change.

**His presentation: Trawl impacts on the relative status of biotic communities of seabed sedimentary habitats in 24 regions worldwide.**

He focused on the assessment of the effects of trawling around the world. He explained what bottom trawling is: bottom trawls are any kind of gear dragged on the sea bottom. All trawls disturb seabed. ICES prepared scenarios to reduce the impact of trawling was conducted prepared by ICES<sup>2</sup>. ICES advises that bottom trawling is the main physical pressure exerted on the seabed across the EU’s marine waters. It is spatially aggregated to form core areas where bottom trawling effort and value of catch is high and larger peripheral fishing areas where effort and value of catch is low. This general pattern is found for all métiers and in all

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<sup>1</sup> [efaro.eu](http://efaro.eu) EFARO, The European Fisheries and Aquaculture Research Organisations, is an association composed of the Directors of the main European Research Institutes involved in Fisheries and Aquaculture research. EFARO is founded under a consensus agreement in 1989. The starting point was the desire to achieve greater cohesion and coordination of Community fisheries Research and Development.

Today EFARO unites numerous researchers and research assistants in 26 member institutes in 20 countries.

<sup>2</sup> EU request on how management scenarios to reduce mobile bottom fishing disturbance on seafloor habitats affect fisheries landing and value [eu.2021.08.pdf](https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8223) ICES. 2021. Working Group on Fisheries Benthic Impact and Trade-offs (WGFBIT; outputs from 2020 meeting). ICES Scientific Reports. 3:70. 46 pp.  
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8223>.

regions. Depletion of the sea bottom depends on the penetration depth of trawls. Recovery rate depends on conditions, among others on the sediment composition. It is slower for gravely sediments. ICES trade off advice from 2021 is very interesting in this regard and should be considered carefully in the broader context of maritime spatial planning: [EU request on how management scenarios to reduce mobile bottom fishing disturbance on seafloor habitats affect fisheries landing and value \(figshare.co\)](#)

### **Tobias Troll, Marine Policy Director at Seas at Risk: The just transition to low impact fisheries**

He stated that bottom trawling has to be seen not only from the environmental or conservation perspective but also from the point of view of the fisheries sector. He referred to the Action Plan and relevant parts on bottom trawls. Fishing and overfishing, including destructive techniques have impact on marine environment. Marine ecosystems are not in good state. The more we deplete the ocean the less fish we get. There is a need for a just transition to low impact fisheries. Europe is the most bottom trawled region in the world. 79% of coastal seabed in Europe is disturbed according to the European Commission. Recovery time is long-term. It ranges between 7.5 and 15 years after one pass of beam trawler. Bottom trawls are not essential for food supply. Many of the main species landed by bottom trawlers – namely sandeels, sprat and blue whiting – are keystone species that are essential links in the food chain of other marine fish, seabirds and mammals. They are not directly consumed by humans, but are rather used to produce fish oil and feed for aquaculture, and could be replaced by alternative feed sources, like insects or plants. In addition, several other species landed in large quantities by bottom trawlers, such as Atlantic cod, are severely overfished in Europe and must be less fished. A reduction of bottom trawling targeting these species would therefore be attainable, and would greatly benefit the marine environment and fish populations, while helping transition EU fisheries towards sustainability and achieve the European Green Deal's objectives of making Europe climate-neutral. On food security: according to FAO, fish consumption has heavily increased in recent years. He stated that maybe we are eating too much sea food. He expressed the view that bottom trawled sea food has higher carbon footprint than chicken. He mentioned the costs of banning bottom trawls in MPAs in Europe. Fishers who fish sustainably must be rewarded. We need to move to low impact fishing, from extractive economy to regenerative economy, which is good for the planet. He referred to the EU policy package, which also refers to this transition<sup>3</sup>.

A report was published by Oceana and Seas at Risk in 2022.<sup>4</sup>

### **Alice Belin DGENV C.2 Marine Environment & Clean Water Services State of play regarding seabed integrity threshold values under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive**

Alice Belin DGENV spoke on MSFD and objectives related to seabed integrity. The descriptors for Good Environmental Status were presented (11). Descriptors 1 and 6 are

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<sup>3</sup> Action Plan, p. 12

<sup>4</sup> [Report: Exploring Alternatives to Europe's bottom trawl fishing gears - Seas at Risk \(seas-at-risk.org\)](#)

relevant to the seabed.

She presented the criteria to assess GES for descriptor 6 referring to seabed, one criteria is on habitat loss or irreversible damages to habitats. Loss of habitats should be included in adverse effects. Threshold values for adverse effects should be based on science and take account the precautionary approach. Bottom trawling needs to be restricted to achieve the goals of MSFD.

### **Presentation of the Marine Action Plan with a focus on actions concerning mobile bottom fishing**

Alice Belin DGENV presented the Action Plan. The Plan builds on existing legislation and policy. It proposes concrete action and measures to reduce impact of fishing on ecosystem. This action plan is part of the Commission's efforts to achieve a more consistent implementation of the EU's environmental policy and the common fisheries policy with its three – environmental, economic and social - sustainability pillars. The Plan also looks at protection of seabed, to reach healthy seabed habitats. Gradual approach is proposed in phasing out bottom trawls. On selectivity and sensitive species: One of the objectives of the baseline rules of the Technical Measures Regulation is to minimise and, where possible, eliminate incidental catches of sensitive marine species. Limits for bycatch are set. Gradual approach to tackle bycatch, with priorities (Harbour porpoise). The Plan calls for protection of eel by adopting eel management plans. This is all about better implementation of the existing legislation.

On seabed: a number of measures are proposed. Work at regional level is underlined.

**Frangiscos Nikolian, DG Mare** (he replaced Valerie Tankin at the last moment)

### **Reflections and Thoughts**

He put the Action Plan in a broader perspective. The whole policy package was launched. In the policy package, emphasis is added on the need for research and development on more innovative gear / less bottom impact, more selectivity and less fuel dependency. This research can be supported by the national OPs of EMFAF. We need a modern, sustainable and profitable fisheries sector. We need to preserve the coastal communities. We need to transfer to more sustainable practices. The Commission is not proposing new legislation but viable solutions to implement existing legislation. On ban of bottom trawling – this is just an element of the package, of the Action Plan. ICES considers that bottom trawls are one of the main factors disturbing sea bottom. We have to recognise that trawls need to be reduced. This is a challenge. AP is setting a vision. The measures will be discussed by Member States before providing Joint Recommendations to the Commission. These JRs will be evaluated by STECF. Process must be gradual and inclusive. Time is provided for discussions at regional level, to explore less impacting techniques. To support Member States with the implementation of the action plan and ensure coherence and effectiveness, the Commission will create a new joint special group for Member States, with stakeholders as observers. The aim will be to facilitate knowledge sharing and discussions between fisheries and environmental communities, as well as to give the Member States' a platform for transparency and dialogue on the implementation of their roadmaps. The Action Plan aims to incentivise Member States to better implement existing legislation, which is already quite comprehensive and if correctly implemented should ensure that the EU achieves its own marine protection objectives but also its international commitments. It is not the intention

of the Commission to create new legislation.

In the chat there were several questions requesting the Commission to better define joint special groups. F.Nikolian answered that these special groups are meant to be established on Member States level - like the Expert Group for Fisheries and Aquaculture. This is a formal 'portal' of the legislative procedure on delegated acts before they get adopted. Other stakeholders could join as observers, depending on the rules of procedure that is created for the specific Expert Group. For example, the European Parliament and the EFCA are observers to the current Expert Group for fisheries and aquaculture. In this specific legislative procedure of putting joint recommendations into legislation, the ACs should be/are consulted by Member State Regional Groups in the stage of creating the joint recommendation.

Discussion: is there future for bottom trawling? It will take some time, but striving to get less impact from bottom trawls. Participant from Denmark: We need active gears to fish.

DG Mare Nikolian: We want sustainable bottom trawling. With help of scientists and industry we can have sustainable fisheries with new, sustainable gears. From our perspective there is a future for the sector.

A participant from Germany: There was general agreement that transition to more sustainable fishing practices will mean that we will fish less and eat less fish. That means we will have to get more food from agriculture. We have to take account of this fact and find a reasonable balance.

NSAC Kenn Skau Fischer: With this proposed set up towards phase out of bottom trawling the fisheries will close down. He expressed disappointment by Commission's approach – it is a top down approach and is not constructive.

DG Mare F. Nikolian: it is definitely a bottom up approach. The Action Plan gives the possibility for Member States to discuss and come up with joint recommendations.