



**Social Partners for Sea Fisheries position paper**  
**Joint employer and worker representatives (Europêche & ETF )**  
**The next Multiannual Financial Framework MFF 2028-2034**

Replying to the public consultation 'EU funding for cross-border education, training and solidarity, youth, media, culture, and creative sectors, values, and civil society' of the European Commission

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In the context of the public consultation on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), particularly its pillar on *EU funding for education, training, values and civil society*, the EU Social Partners for Sea Fisheries, Europêche and ETF, highlight the vital role of the fishing sector in the EU's socio-economic fabric, food security, and the need for targeted EU-level investment to ensure its future viability<sup>1</sup>.

According to the STECF 2024 report, the EU fishing fleet, with approximately 71,000 vessels, produces 3.5 million tonnes of seafood each year. This translates into around 10 billion meals, making it a unique contributor to public health, food sovereignty, and a sustainable protein supply chain with a low environmental footprint. However, the challenges facing the sector are structural, generational, and increasing in complexity.

The MFF and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) have played a crucial role in supporting EU fisheries, yet funding is often insufficient and overly complex to access. While coordination with other EU instruments is welcome, we underline:

- ▮ **Fisheries is an exclusive EU policy and must retain a dedicated fund;**
- ▮ **The EMFAF envelope should be increased or at least maintained** in real terms to deliver on urgent and emerging needs;
- ▮ **Social, training, safety, and generational renewal objectives must be embedded** and properly resourced in all future EU frameworks.

**Making fisheries fit for the future - skills, mobility and modernisation**

The sector faces a dual challenge: fleet modernisation and building a skilled, resilient workforce. Vessels are ageing (average age: 36–39 years), infrastructure is outdated, and working conditions can be harsh. The human element, which is essential to safety, sustainability and productivity, is being undermined by labour shortages, ageing crew (60% are between 40–64 years old), and low levels of qualification (67% with basic education only).

To remain viable and attractive, the fisheries sector requires targeted EU investment in skills, mobility and safety, aligned with labour market demands and broader EU transitions. EU funds should support:

- ▮ **Standardised and harmonised training curricula across Member States, aligned with international obligations (e.g. ILO C188, STCW-F);**

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<sup>1</sup> The arguments in the paper are limited to this consultation on education and funding, though a Europêche response can also be found to the main consultation under the MFF 2028-2034 consultation, which should be seen together to get a full grasp of the importance of MFF for the fisheries sector, and more importantly to see in what way it is detrimental.

- ▮ Cross-border mobility of workers and mutual recognition of certifications to encourage professional movement and intergenerational exchange;
- ▮ Training-the-trainer and capacity-building schemes for vocational schools, social partners and onboard learning;
- ▮ Integration of sustainability, digital tools, and innovative fishing techniques into training curricula and upskilling programmes;
- ▮ Pilot projects and trials for new technologies (e.g. energy efficiency, onboard safety) with a focus on workforce safety and competence.

Initiatives like *Catching the Potential* and *Green to Blue* provide good practices<sup>2</sup>. These should be scaled up, institutionalised, and backed by long-term EU support. The MFF must recognise that fishers of tomorrow will need to master data, legal frameworks, sustainable practices and technical operations. Hence, a complete shift from traditional models.

#### **Added value of EU funding and the role of the EMFAF**

EU funding offers unique added value compared to national or regional support, particularly for small-scale actors facing high entry barriers. The fisheries sector struggles with:

- ▮ Lack of access to loans due to operational risk and vessel age;
- ▮ Limited uptake of financial instruments;
- ▮ High administrative burden and fragmented access rules;
- ▮ Underdeveloped inter-regional training partnerships and project networks.

Therefore, we support options to streamline rules across programmes, while retaining a dedicated EU fisheries fund with simplified procedures. Without a strong EMFAF, many fisheries will not survive. EU-level funding is essential to:

- ▮ Support cross-border education, training and research mobility;
- ▮ Promote basic skills development and lifelong learning;
- ▮ Foster social innovation and inclusion in traditionally male-dominated, ageing sectors;
- ▮ Bridge gaps between training providers, research centres, employers and authorities in the blue economy;
- ▮ Deliver safety, innovation and labour resilience across coastal communities.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)'s environmental ambitions have not been matched by social objectives. Social indicators, like fair wages, safety, youth/women employment, quality jobs, CBA coverage, and qualifications, are poorly integrated, with no 'social environmental law e.g. MSFD' equivalent for decent work. Policy coherence between fisheries and social policy, including better reference to Directive 2017/159/EU and ILO C188, is overdue. Social improvements have so far stemmed from Social Partner initiatives, not the EU main fisheries law itself.

**Recommendation: Anchor social sustainability in fisheries law and fund design, including targets and performance indicators that reflect the sector's human capital and safety needs. These must be directly linked to financial allocations, not just abstract indicators.**

#### **Facing structural challenges - strategic importance of fisheries for food and solidarity**

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<sup>2</sup> *Catching the Potential* EMFF Project and *Green to Blue* Erasmus+ Project.

Beyond employment, fisheries are critical to food security and the resilience of coastal regions. Global protein demand is rising, yet EU domestic production is declining, replaced by imports from countries with lower labour and environmental standards. This undermines the EU's own regulatory values and global credibility.

The current CFP fails to sufficiently address:

- Climate change, energy transition, and decarbonisation of fleets;
- Workforce renewal and occupational attractiveness;
- Displacement due to offshore wind expansion and spatial competition;
- Post-Brexit trade and access impacts;
- Global developments such as the Russia-Ukraine war.

Without addressing these challenges in the next MFF, fishers risk being marginalised in broader ocean strategies if their needs are not prioritised. While the blue economy promotes multi-use of maritime space, fisheries often face displacement rather than integration. Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) must include robust social safeguards, not just ecological ceilings.

The risk of abandoning certain sea areas to more profitable or subsidised uses is growing. Fisheries must not be priced out of ocean space. Subsequently, the MFF must ensure access to resources, decent work, and modern vessels. Former Commissioner Sinkevičius has admitted that current EMFAF funding is insufficient for transformation needs. A *Fleet Renewal Strategy*, backed by innovation funds and realistic transition timelines, is essential.

So, in summary.

## **Key Issues**

### **1. Declining capacity, ageing fleet & labour crisis**

The EU fleet's net profitability dropped by 52% in 2022 to €0.15 billion, the lowest recorded level. Meanwhile, the fleet has shrunk by 28% since 2000, and employment is down by 33%. The average vessel age remains high (36–39 years), leading to safety risks and inefficiency. Accidents are frequent: 500 vessels are involved annually, with human error and equipment failure accounting for 84% of cases.

### **2. Workforce crisis & social underinvestment**

The fisheries workforce is ageing (60% aged 40–64), largely male, and underqualified (67%). The lack of younger entrants is due to perceived poor working conditions, low wages, and lack of training pathways. Social goals like decent work and safety are not effectively embedded in the CFP, nor reflected in the financial architecture of the EMFAF.

### **3. Lack of Policy Coherence**

The sector faces displacement due to offshore wind rollouts and competition for marine space, while at the same time being asked to meet higher environmental and social standards than third-country imports. This undermines the EU's strategic autonomy and food sovereignty goals.

### **4. Insufficient Funding for Innovation and Modernisation**

Despite ambitions for carbon neutrality, the EMFAF lacks the scope and scale to fund the required technological transition. Modernisation is hampered by legal and financial constraints, with fishers bearing high risks in adopting new technology, particularly small-scale operators.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Dedicated and increased EMFAF budget**

A dedicated fund is essential. Fisheries is an exclusive EU competence and cannot be folded into broader horizontal funds. The EMFAF must be increased, or at minimum, maintained, to meet both environmental and social sustainability targets.

### **2. EU fleet renewal plan**

A structured EU programme should allow fleet modernisation, aligned with safety, decarbonisation, and labour standards. Investments should cover innovative propulsion systems, trial technologies, and safety retrofits, with risk-sharing mechanisms, not just loans.

### **3. Mainstream social objectives in EU fisheries law**

Social sustainability must be placed on par with environmental goals within the CFP. This includes formal cross-referencing to legislation like Directive 2017/159/EU and integrating indicators such as fleet profitability, safety records, salary levels, youth/women employment, and training access.

### **4. ETF support & training modernisation**

The European Social Fund (ESF+) and European Training Foundation (ETF) should be mobilised to build a harmonised EU-wide training and certification system for fishers. This would include sustainable fisheries modules, digital navigation, and resource stewardship. Programmes like Catching the Potential and Green to Blue can provide tested frameworks.

### **5. Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) with social equity**

MSP should prioritise multi-use compatibility and social justice, ensuring offshore energy projects do not displace fishers or compromise safety, emissions targets, and livelihoods. Social impact assessments must become a formal MSP component.

## **Conclusion**

The Social Partners for Sea Fisheries call for a strong, coherent, and socially-inclusive EU budget, fit to serve a sector that contributes to food, jobs, and the maritime identity of the Union. Fishers are not just workers, they are custodians of ocean space, stewards of sustainability, and enablers of solidarity between generations and regions.

The fisheries sector is navigating turbulent waters: climate transition, labour shortages, spatial pressures, and increasing imports from countries with weaker standards. Without a bold, future-proof funding strategy, the EU risks undermining its own goals on food security, sustainability, and strategic autonomy. A dedicated EMFAF, reinforced social provisions, and an integrated approach to training and innovation are indispensable for securing a resilient, modern EU fisheries sector.