



ETF Reaction to the Evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy

The ETF is of the opinion that the Evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy, published by the Commission on 30 April 2026, is an important exercise to highlight several critical areas that directly impact the social and labour conditions of workers in the fishing sector. The Evaluation also allows to better assess whether past objectives were appropriate, the extent of their achievement, and the associated costs.

The Evaluation shows that despite the big sacrifices made by fishers in terms of reduction of the fishing effort, number of vessels and jobs, the results achieved in stock recovery are important but not optimal. This means that while **the Commission itself admits the failures of the CFP and the dramatic socio-economic price paid by the sector**, it still fails to provide a critical reflection over the measures adopted.

Workforce trends and the challenge of generational renewal

The evaluation confirms a steady and concerning decline in employment within the catch sector: 141064 fishers were directly employed in the EU fishing fleet in 2014 and in 2023 only 119479 (-15.3%, but -29.6% in Full-Time Equivalent). This indicates a shift towards more part-time or seasonal work, which weakens job stability for fishers. Furthermore, we can observe:

- Ageing workforce: There is a clear ageing trend among EU fishers. The number of workers in the 40-64 and over-65 categories has increased, while the number of younger workers (15-39) has significantly decreased.
- Barriers to entry: The sector is increasingly perceived as unattractive due to difficult working conditions, safety risks, bad image of fisheries and low generational renewal.
- Migrant labour: Labour shortages are increasingly being compensated for by migrant fishers, particularly in the large-scale and distant-water fleets.

Stagnating wages and fair remuneration

A central priority for the ETF is ensuring a fair standard of living. The evaluation reveals that the economic benefits expected from the 2013 reform have not reached the workers.

- Failure to meet wage targets: The 2011 impact assessment predicted wage increases of up to 125% by 2022; however, the actual increase has been very moderate.
- Income stability: While the processing sector has seen a 25% increase in average wages, fishers in the catch sector have seen their real purchasing power impacted by inflation and energy price volatility.
- Profitability gap: The unpredictability of catches, which is increasing due to several factors, make it difficult to maintain stable livelihoods in many coastal communities.

Safety on board and the ageing fleet

Health and safety are paramount for the ETF, yet the data presents a mixed and potentially dangerous outlook for workers at sea.

- Increasing casualties: While Eurostat shows a general decrease in fatal accidents (aggregated data for fisheries and aquaculture), data from the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) shows a significant increase in marine casualties for vessels over 15 meters.



- Ageing vessels: The average age of the active EU fleet is now 33.5 years. Many vessels are approaching the end of their technical lifetime, which increases safety hazards for the crew.

Social standards in the international dimension

The report mentions the work done by the EU in the Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RMFOs) and in the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs).

The ETF's work on the international stage is reflected in the evaluation's focus on Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs) and Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs).

- Social clause: The ETF acknowledges that the revamped social clause in SFPAs since 2024 is better than the previous one, but insists in underlining that such clause does not contain all the necessary provisions to protect employment conditions of third country nationals, in particular about minimum wage.
- ILO C188 and RMFOs: in the report the Commission claims the EU has supported integrating ILO C188 in some RMFOs. Unfortunately, this has happened only partially, and it is not acceptable as we are talking about international minimum standards. ILO C188 standards are the bare minimum.
- Level playing field: When dealing with third countries, the disparity between the EU's robust tools for environmental sustainability - such as the IUU Regulation - and the lack of equivalent mechanisms for social rights and working conditions is striking.

Fleet size and capacity trends confirm the sector is shrinking

The report confirms the concerning trends about the EU fleet. It seems the decline of the EU fleet is reaching a critical point: the number of vessels in the EU has dropped significantly (-8.6% since 2014), Gross Tonnage and Propulsion power have also decreased while the average age of the fishing vessels has increased from 24 years in 2014 to 34.8 years in 2023. With the renewal rate for newly built vessels falling below 1%, we are looking at a fleet that is becoming obsolete.

These figures do more than just show a sector in economic difficulty. They highlight the deteriorating reality for the people at the heart of the industry: the workers. An aging, shrinking fleet leads to several negative outcomes:

- Worsening conditions on board: Older vessels often lack the modern space and amenities required for decent living and working conditions.
- Gross tonnage limitation: the calculation of the gross tonnage as it is today incorporates the space dedicated to the living areas for the crew, including cabins and sanitary facilities. This is not acceptable as vessels owners have no incentive to offer better conditions in order to maximise stock space for catches.
- Safety risks: Outdated technology and aging structures increase the risk of accidents, making the workplace more dangerous for fishers.
- Lack of career prospects: A shrinking industry offers fewer opportunities for professional growth and stable employment.
- Low attractiveness: When young people see an industry with no modern investment and no long-term vision, they naturally look elsewhere for work.

This data make clear is **fundamental disconnect between high-level policy goals and the**



economic reality of the fleet and of the people working at sea. For example, while the decarbonization of the fishing industry is a goal we support for the long-term, these ambitious objectives are currently far from the reach of the sector and even further from the existing appetite for investment.

Profitability shrinking

The report shows that the overall net profit margin has decreased from 8% in 2014 to 1% in 2023 and thus did not reach the expected average 18% net profit margin, but rather the contrary. Energy costs continue to have an important role in the costs of fishing operation and therefore in the calculation of the profitability. As the majority of fishers are paid “on the catch” this has inevitably an impact on their remunerations and on attractiveness of the profession.

The legal gap for OSH and enforcement

The evaluation seems to minimize the problems linked with safety. However:

- While the CFP Regulation mentions safety and working conditions in its recitals, it lacks substantive legal provisions to address them directly, leaving these issues to be managed through other directives (such as Directive 2017/159) or national laws.
- While Directive 2017/159 (transposing ILO C188) is in force, effective control and enforcement mechanisms are often lacking at the national level.
- ETF is convinced that an ageing fleet and gross tonnage limitation definitively have an impact on safety on board.

Stocks recovery and landing obligation

Compared to the objectives set by the impact assessment of 2011 and the entry into force of the CFP Regulation in 2014, despite the sacrifices of the fishing sector in terms of reduction of fishing effort, the evaluation report shows a real but non-optimal progress in terms of fish stock recovery. This has not translated into socio-economic positive effects for the sector.

In terms of reduction of discards, the full introduction of the landing obligation in 2019 and its scarce results, show that it was a measure not fit-for purpose, that forces fishers to work longer, do more fishing trips and consume more fuel with the implied costs and environmental impact. Efforts and resources should rather be directed to innovation and introduction of more selective fishing gears, with proper support and training for fishers.

Conclusions

- The ETF acknowledges that the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) attempts to manage complex problems that are often influenced by larger global trends outside the scope of the policy itself. However, this evaluation exercise clearly shows that giving priority almost exclusively to environmental sustainability did not bring the expected outcomes. This failure occurred despite the massive sacrifices forced upon the sector, including an important reduction in fishing efforts, a shrinking EU fleet, and the loss of many jobs. It is not acceptable that the fisheries sector alone is forced to pay the price of the impact on fish stocks of other human activities.



- While the evaluation highlights some positive steps forward, such as improved scientific knowledge and expertise, the broader picture shows a policy that has failed to deliver on its main objectives. The social dimension has been forgotten. The evolution of wages has completely missed previous predictions, and the ongoing decline (or absence of improvement) in jobs, safety, and working and living conditions on board remains a critical concern for us. Together, these negative factors continue to destroy the attractiveness of the fishing profession, which is vital for the survival of European coastal communities.
- The ETF is convinced of the crucial role EU fisheries plays in EU food security. That is why policies should enable the sector to thrive and create opportunities to grow, rather than creating obstacles that hinder innovations, investments and improvements for the crew.
- The ETF strongly believes that the findings of this evaluation must inform the direction of future EU policy decisions. We demand a truly balanced approach that gives equal weight to all three pillars of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental.
- The EU must use the leverage of its relevant market size to pressure international partners. We need to ensure that environmental and social standards improve globally and not just within the EU.