

## JOINT POSITION PAPER

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# Implementing the IMO 1995 STCW-F Convention and Code through an EU Directive: Strengthening Safety, Skills, Labour Mobility and Equal Protection for European Fishers

### Executive Summary

- The International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F), was adopted by IMO in 1995 and revised in May 2024. The 1995 STCW-F Convention is a binding treaty that sets certification and minimum training requirements for crews of seagoing fishing vessels with the aim to promote the safety of life at sea and the protection of the marine environment, taking into account the unique nature of the fishing industry and the fishing working environment.
- The revised STCW-F Convention and Code entered into force on 1 January 2026 and provides a modern, internationally recognised framework for the training, certification and competence of fishing vessel personnel, including urgently needed procedures for mutual recognition of certificates of competency for fishing vessel personnel
- The European Union has consistently pursued higher standards of maritime safety, professional competence, labour mobility and social protection across the maritime sector. While the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) has been fully integrated into the EU regulatory framework, the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F) has not yet received equivalent treatment.
- Implementing STCW-F through an EU Directive would improve safety in one of the world's most hazardous professions, facilitate labour mobility within the Union, reduce administrative burdens for Member States, and ensure that fishers receive the same level of protection and professional recognition as other maritime workers.

- The European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament should therefore support the incorporation of the revised STCW-F Convention into EU law.

#### **Policy Action**

The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council should:

1. Develop and adopt an EU Directive implementing the revised STCW-F Convention.
2. Establish an EU-wide framework for mutual recognition of fishing vessel personnel certificates.
3. Mandate EMSA to assess and monitor compliance with STCW-F training and certification standards.
4. Integrate STCW-F requirements into existing STCW-based education, certification and quality assurance systems.
5. Use STCW-F Chapter III as the common European standard for basic safety training of fishing vessel personnel.
6. Promote labour and skills mobility between Member States and between fisheries and other maritime sectors through harmonised competence frameworks.
7. Strengthen occupational safety and reduce fatalities in the fishing sector by ensuring all fishers receive internationally recognised safety training.

#### **What is the STCW-F?**

Members at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) had the purpose to further promote safety of life and property at sea and the protection of the marine environment by establishing in common agreement international standards of training, certification and watchkeeping for personnel employed on board fishing vessels. This objective has been achieved with the establishment of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel, 1995 (STCW-F 1995).

The 1995 STCW-F Convention sets the certification and minimum training requirements for officers of seagoing fishing vessels of 24 metres in length and over, for engineer officers of seagoing fishing vessels with a propulsion power of 750 kW or more. In addition, the STCW-F Convention and Code include the standards for basic safety training for fishing vessel personnel and watchkeeping for all fishing vessel personnel regardless the size of the vessel, propulsion power or area of operation.

The STCW-F Convention is the first to establish basic requirements on training, certification and watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel on an international level. The Convention prescribes minimum standards relating to training, certification and watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel, which countries are obliged to meet or free to exceed.

The revised STCW-F Convention and Code was adopted during the 108<sup>th</sup> session of the IMO Maritime Safety Committee that took place from 15 to 24 May 2024 at the IMO Headquarters in London. The revised STCW-F Convention and Code entered into force on 1 January 2026 and provides a modern, internationally recognised framework for the training, certification and competence of fishing

vessel personnel, more aligned with the IMO STCW Convention and Code.

### STCW-F Applies to All Fishing Vessel Personnel

A persistent misconception remains that the STCW-F Convention only applies to fishing vessels of 24 metres in length and over. This interpretation is incorrect.

The STCW-F Convention applies to all fishing vessel personnel regardless of vessel length, propulsion power or operating area. While Chapter II establishes qualification requirements for navigational officers serving on fishing vessels of 24 metres in length and over and engineer officers serving on vessels with propulsion power of 750 kW or more, the remaining chapters have a much broader scope.

In particular, Chapter III, which covers familiarisation and basic safety training, applies to all fishers. Consequently, the safety-related provisions of STCW-F are relevant throughout the entire European fishing fleet, including the large number of small-scale and coastal fishing vessels operating in EU waters.

Given that small-scale vessels constitute the majority of the EU fleet and employ a significant share of its workers, extending STCW-F basic safety training to all fishers in a future Directive is imperative. Addressing this segment is critical to mitigating the high frequency of accidents occurring on smaller vessels. An EU Directive implementing STCW-F would therefore establish a common baseline of safety and competence for all fishers, not merely those serving on larger vessels.

### The Revised STCW-F Convention Closely Mirrors the Existing STCW Framework

The revised 1995 STCW-F Convention, which entered into force on 1 January 2026, has been developed in a manner that closely aligns its structure and requirements with the well-established STCW Convention applicable to merchant shipping.

EU Member States already possess extensive experience in implementing STCW requirements through existing systems for:

- education and training;
- competency assessment;
- certification;
- quality assurance;
- inspection and enforcement;
- recognition of qualifications.

As a result, implementation of STCW-F **would not require the creation of entirely new structures**. The primary additions concern fisheries-specific competences and operational knowledge that are unique to the fishing sector.

The feasibility of this approach has already been demonstrated in practice. In the Netherlands, professional competency profiles and training pathways for merchant shipping, dredging and fisheries have been integrated within a common educational structure. Shared maritime competencies are taught through a common foundation programme, while sector-specific skills are delivered through specialised modules. Furthermore, legislation allows relevant sea service to be recognised across sectors.

This approach has not only simplified administration but has also increased the attractiveness of careers in the fishing industry by creating clearer career pathways and greater professional mobility within the wider maritime sector.

The Dutch experience demonstrates that STCW-F implementation can be achieved efficiently and effectively by building upon existing STCW systems.

### Supporting the Objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy through Environmental Competence

The revised STCW-F Convention recognises that modern fishing vessel personnel must possess not only safety-related competencies but also an understanding of their responsibilities regarding the protection of the marine environment.

This reflects the evolving role of fishers as professional users and stewards of marine resources. The revised Convention includes competencies related to pollution prevention, environmentally responsible vessel operations, waste management, and compliance with applicable environmental regulations.

These provisions align closely with the objectives of the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which seeks to ensure that fishing and aquaculture activities are environmentally sustainable in the long term and are managed in a manner consistent with achieving healthy marine ecosystems.

Successful implementation of the CFP depends not only on regulatory measures but also on the knowledge, awareness and professional conduct of those operating fishing vessels on a daily basis.

Fishers play a critical role in achieving EU objectives related to:

- sustainable exploitation of marine biological resources;
- protection of marine ecosystems and biodiversity;
- reduction of marine pollution, emissions and marine litter;
- compliance with technical conservation measures;
- responsible use of fishing gear and equipment;
- implementation of ecosystem-based fisheries management.

By incorporating environmental competencies into the professional training and certification of fishers, STCW-F strengthens the human dimension of fisheries sustainability. It ensures that environmental protection becomes an integral part of professional practice rather than a separate regulatory obligation.

Implementing STCW-F through an EU Directive would therefore contribute not only to safer fisheries but also to the effective implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Natura 2000 and broader objectives under the European Green Deal and Sustainable Blue Economy agenda.

In this regard, STCW-F should be viewed as an important instrument supporting the transition towards a highly skilled, environmentally responsible and future-proof European fishing sector.

The success of the Common Fisheries Policy ultimately depends on the decisions made every day on board fishing vessels. By integrating environmental stewardship into the professional

competence framework for fishers, STCW-F transforms sustainability objectives from policy ambitions into operational practice.

### Implementing STCW-F Would Reduce Rather Than Increase Administrative Burdens

**Training and Certification Can Be Integrated into Existing Structures**  
Because the revised STCW-F Convention now closely resembles the STCW Convention, training and certification requirements can largely be embedded within existing maritime education and certification systems.

Most training institutions already provide STCW-based courses and possess the necessary infrastructure, instructors, quality assurance mechanisms and certification procedures. Only a limited number of fisheries-specific modules would need to be added.

Rather than creating parallel systems, implementation would allow Member States to leverage existing investments and expertise.

### Mutual Recognition of Fishing Qualifications Requires an EU Framework

A more significant challenge is the current absence of a structured system for the mutual recognition of fishing vessel certificates within the European Union.

This situation directly restricts the free movement of workers and labour mobility within the internal market. While a driving licence issued in one Member State is recognised throughout the Union, skilled fishers often face substantial barriers when seeking employment in another Member State because their certificates are not automatically recognised.

At present, individual Member States must independently assess the training and certification systems of other countries before granting recognition. This is a highly resource-intensive process. In theory, 27 Member States would each need to evaluate the systems of the other 26 Member States. Such duplication of effort is neither efficient nor consistent with the principles of the Single Market.

A practical solution already exists within the STCW framework. Directive (EU) 2022/993 provides a mandate to the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) to assess whether third countries meet STCW requirements. EMSA possesses the expertise, experience and institutional capacity to perform these assessments on behalf of Member States.

Extending a similar mechanism to STCW-F would:

- eliminate duplication of assessments;
- reduce administrative costs;
- ensure consistent standards across the Union;
- facilitate mutual recognition of fishing qualifications;
- strengthen skill and labour mobility within the EU fishing sector.

Rather than creating additional bureaucracy, an EU Directive would streamline existing processes and significantly reduce the administrative burden on national authorities.

## STCW-F Provides the Logical Framework for Basic Safety Training of Fishers

Chapter III of the revised STCW-F Convention establishes requirements for familiarisation and basic safety training for fishing vessel personnel.

The European Union has already recognised the importance of safety training through Council Directive (EU) 2017/159 implementing the Work in Fishing Convention.

Article 35(3)(b) requires that:

"the competent authority shall ensure that every fisherman on board has received basic safety training approved by the competent authority."

However, the Directive does not provide a detailed international benchmark for the content of such training.

The revised STCW-F Convention provides exactly such a benchmark and therefore offers the most logical and internationally recognised framework for implementing this requirement consistently across the European Union.

Furthermore, Member States have already implemented the STCW Basic Training programme for seafarers. The content of this training corresponds closely with the basic safety training requirements established under STCW-F.

In practical terms, fishers could complete the existing STCW Basic Training programme and receive additional fisheries-specific instruction covering the limited number of STCW-F elements not already included in the STCW Basic training

This approach would:

- minimise implementation costs;
- improve efficiency at maritime training institutions;
- avoid duplication of training programmes;
- create greater flexibility for maritime workers moving between sectors;
- rapidly raise safety standards throughout the fishing industry.

Transposing the STCW-F into an EU Directive would elevate the profile of this IMO Convention at international level. By leveraging its position as a major seafood market, the EU could encourage third countries to ratify the Convention. This would ultimately contribute to enhancing the protection of fishers globally, improving safety standards, and ensuring that seafood products are produced in safer and more sustainable conditions.

## Improving Safety in One of the World's Most Dangerous Occupations

Fishing remains one of the most dangerous professions in the world. According to conservative estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 3.65 fishers lose their lives every hour worldwide as a result of occupational accidents.

These figures underline the urgent need for robust international standards governing safety training, competence and certification. Fishers face many of the same hazards encountered by seafarers in merchant shipping, including:

- vessel emergencies;
- fires and explosions;
- severe weather conditions;
- man-overboard incidents;

- fatigue;
- equipment-related accidents;
- search and rescue situations.

Yet, despite these risks, fishers have historically received less regulatory attention and fewer opportunities for internationally recognised professional development than their counterparts in the merchant fleet.

The [2025 baseline study on training and certification requirements for fishers](#), commissioned by the European Commission, reveals significant discrepancies in basic safety training across EU Member States. In several nations, formal safety training for fishers remains entirely absent. This gap is unacceptable, particularly when considering the inherent risks of the sector, including small-scale vessels. These findings urge EU policymakers to take decisive action to elevate the safety performance of the entire European fishing fleet.

Fishers should not be treated as second-class maritime workers. They deserve the same level of protection, professional recognition and access to training as all other seafarers. Implementing STCW-F through an EU Directive would send a clear message that the European Union is committed to ensuring equal standards of safety and professionalism across the entire maritime sector.

### Skills and attractiveness

The EU fishing sector is currently facing a period of social and economic decline, marked by a steady reduction in the number of landings, active vessels, and jobs. The industry is often perceived as lacking a clear future, which has resulted in low attractiveness for younger generations.

Implementing STCW-F compliant standards for basic safety training across the EU will enhance the skills of fishers and elevate the professional profile of fisheries occupations. By professionalizing the sector, these measures can help reverse current labour shortages and serve as a catalyst to attract more young workers to the industry.

### Why is a level playing field important?

A minimum level of training, including the Basic Safety Training for All Fishing Vessel Personnel is needed to know what minimum (safety) training a fisher from a country other than the flag of the vessel has received before this fisher is employed or engaged onboard the fishing vessel.

Absence of minimum requirements on safety and health or level playing may lead to a competitive business model that might jeopardise the safety and health of fishers.

### Establishing a Common European Baseline for Fisher Safety While Respecting Proportionality

One of the most important features of the revised STCW-F Convention is that it establishes a common minimum safety standard for all fishing vessel personnel, irrespective of vessel size, engine power or area of operation.

Section A-III/1 requires every fisher, before being assigned shipboard duties, to receive approved training in:

- personal survival techniques;
- fire prevention and firefighting;
- elementary first aid; and
- personal safety and social responsibilities.

In addition, all personnel must receive onboard safety familiarisation training covering emergency procedures, alarm systems, man-overboard situations, evacuation routes, lifesaving appliances and immediate response to accidents and medical emergencies.

These requirements address the most common causes of fatalities and serious injuries in the fishing sector and ensure that all fishers possess a minimum level of competence before commencing work at sea.

Importantly, STCW-F does not adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Section A-III/1 explicitly permits Administrations to grant exemptions for fishing vessels of less than 24 metres in length and/or operating exclusively in limited waters where the full application of requirements would be unreasonable or impracticable.

Such exemptions must, however, always take into account:

- the safety of persons on board;
- the safety of the fishing vessel;
- the protection of property; and
- the protection of the marine environment.

This balanced approach closely reflects the principles of Better Regulation promoted by the European Union. It combines a harmonised minimum safety standard for all fishers with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the operational realities of small-scale and coastal fisheries.

Implementing STCW-F through an EU Directive would therefore not impose disproportionate requirements on small fishing enterprises. Instead, it would provide a common European framework that guarantees essential safety competencies while allowing Member States to apply proportionate measures where justified by local operating conditions.

Such an approach would improve safety outcomes, increase legal certainty for national administrations and industry stakeholders, and contribute to a more level playing field across the European fishing sector.

### What is the relevance to Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements

EU Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPA's) are intended to allow EU fishing vessels to fish for surplus stocks in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of third countries in a legally regulated way. These SFPA's may require a number or percentage of the crew to be from the origin of the country that opens its EEZ for fishing activities. Additionally, the ship owner may be required to appoint and assign these crew members to all positions aboard the vessel.

Due to flag state requirement, all fishing vessel personnel, regardless of their nationality, need to meet the minimum requirements in education, training and medical fitness in respect of the safety of life and property at sea and the protection of the marine environment.

The standards in the STCW-F can help to set a minimum level playing field with respect to training, certification and watchkeeping for those countries that have ratified the Convention. This also applies to the requirements regarding the basic safety training for all fishing vessel personnel.

#### What action should be taken?

The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council should:

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2. Establish an EU-wide framework for mutual recognition of fishing vessel certificates.
3. Mandate EMSA to assess and monitor compliance with STCW-F training and certification standards.
4. Integrate STCW-F requirements into existing STCW-based education, certification and quality assurance systems.
5. Use STCW-F Chapter III as the common European standard for basic safety training of fishers.
6. Promote labour mobility between Member States and between fisheries and other maritime sectors through harmonised competence frameworks.
7. Strengthen occupational safety and reduce fatalities in the fishing sector by ensuring all fishers receive internationally recognised safety training.

#### Further information

For more information about this Position Paper, please contact:

- Andrea Albertazzi, Senior Policy Officer Fisheries of the European Transport Workers' Federation.  
Tel. +32 477 82 10 24, email [a.albertazzi@etf-europe.org](mailto:a.albertazzi@etf-europe.org)
- Daniel Voces de Onáindi, Managing Director of Europêche  
Tel. +32 489 26 81 07, email [Daniel.Voces@europeche.org](mailto:Daniel.Voces@europeche.org)
- Riccardo Pelani, Policy Advisor, Copa-Cogeca  
[Riccardo.Pelani@copa-cogeca.eu](mailto:Riccardo.Pelani@copa-cogeca.eu)  
[www.copa-cogeca.eu](http://www.copa-cogeca.eu)
- Cor Blonk, chair of the Sectoral social Dialogue Committee for Sea Fisheries.  
Tel. +31 651 57 54 26, email [cblonk@pelagicfish.eu](mailto:cblonk@pelagicfish.eu)

#### Related reading

- International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel, 1995 (STCW-F)