



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

Sustainable blue economy and aquaculture

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses that vibrant oceans are a prerequisite for a thriving blue economy, and that this blue economy must function within ecological boundaries, according to the concept of planetary boundaries. Sustainable management of oceans and seas should therefore be a key priority, based on knowledge, awareness-raising and cross-border cooperation, in order to achieve the objectives of the EU strategic agenda;
- welcomes the European Commission's intention to set up a blue forum to pool knowledge and experience, create synergies, find creative solutions and promote the development of the sector, in addition to its intention to put together proposals to coordinate the use of funds in this area;
- urges the European Commission, with regard to sustainable investment in the maritime sector and in particular maritime industries, to make greater use of regions, their smart specialisation strategies and their economic ecosystems to form Europe-wide cooperation networks capable of competing with international players. These networks, under the European Sea Tech label, should be able to respond to European Commission calls for proposals to develop and finance the first phases of their high-risk projects;
- stresses that local and regional authorities have an important role to play in developing European aquaculture. In the field of fisheries, local and regional authorities are often responsible for the authorisation procedure and for managing and providing support to small and medium-sized enterprises operating on their territory, thus building up extensive experience in these areas. This proximity to the sector provides experience that must be recognised, coordinated and put to good use;
- proposes that a one-stop shop for aquaculture licences be set up as soon as possible in order to speed up the authorisation process and facilitate communication between stakeholders and different authorities at various levels; also recommends introducing training modules on permit granting for local authorities, in order to speed up the application of EU rules.

Rapporteur

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**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
Sustainable blue economy and aquaculture**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

Sustainable blue economy

1. welcomes the European Commission's Communication on a new approach to a sustainable blue economy in the EU – Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future, which presents the Commission's overall vision and sets out a strategy for a sustainable blue economy of maritime sectors and industries. Welcomes, in this connection, the shift from the concept of "blue growth" to "blue economy";
2. agrees that the objectives of the Green Deal and the transition to a more sustainable, green economy cannot be achieved without the blue economy. Achieving the objectives of the Green Deal and sustainable development in all sectors requires radical changes to reduce the impact of human activity on seas and oceans and to protect resources and biodiversity. These changes also need to be made compatible with the economic and social sustainability of maritime activities;
3. maintains, therefore, that green and blue policies should be more connected. Oceans are one of the principal reservoirs of biodiversity in the world. They make up more than 90% of the planet's inhabitable space and absorb around 26% of anthropogenic carbon dioxide as well as over 90% of the excess heat emitted into the atmosphere each year. Numerous studies demonstrate the key role played by marine biodiversity in the health of the planet and social wellbeing;
4. stresses that vibrant oceans are a prerequisite for a thriving blue economy, and that this blue economy must function within ecological boundaries, according to the concept of planetary boundaries. Sustainable management of oceans and seas should therefore be a key priority, based on knowledge, awareness raising and cross-border cooperation, in order to achieve the objectives of the EU strategic agenda. The exchange of up-to-date data and the pursuit of common objectives are also important in this connection;
5. notes that the blue economy has a significant social and economic impact, not only on coastal and maritime regions, but also on the European Union as a whole, and can ensure a green and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the most affected sectors, such as tourism and fisheries. In many countries, the blue economy has a huge positive impact on GDP;
6. notes that ocean energy can play an important role in enhancing the reliability and security of our energy supply. As long as it is compatible with existing activities and respectful of marine habitats, use of ocean energy would reduce countries' dependence on fossil fuels, contribute to climate change mitigation and promote the creation of new quality jobs, especially in European coastal regions, where unemployment is often high;

7. highlights the contribution of maritime industries to the energy transition and fighting climate change, particularly through the renewable energy sector, decarbonisation of maritime transport and the circular economy, including recycling plastic from oceans;
8. recalls, in particular, that maritime transport emissions have increased by almost 32% over the last 20 years. The development of a sustainable shipbuilding industry could make a significant contribution to achieving the EU's climate objectives. Supports, in this regard, the European Commission's objectives of potentially reducing SO₂ and NO_x emissions from international shipping by up to 80% and 20% respectively within 10 years. However, it is essential to bear in mind the needs of the outermost regions, as they require measures that are tailored to their specific structural set-up, due to their remote location and considerable reliance on air and maritime transport, to ensure their connectivity and supplies;
9. emphasises that in order to safeguard and create long-lasting, good-quality jobs, particularly in the ship-building sector, Europe must be protected from unfair competition which is destroying its industry;
10. encourages a cross-cutting approach to maritime industries that integrates all maritime activities – both traditional and new, civilian and military – and takes into consideration the critical cross-cutting challenges of the ecological and digital transitions and Industry 4.0;
11. welcomes the European Commission's intention to set up a blue forum to pool knowledge and experience, create synergies, find creative solutions and promote the development of the sector, in addition to its intention to put together proposals to coordinate the use of funds in this area;
12. notes that national governments lack a constructive approach to developing the maritime economy. In most coastal states, support for this economy only exists on paper, and national smart specialisation plans and strategies do not pay sufficient attention to the maritime economy, the financial support available is insufficient, and the rules and criteria for awarding it are too complex;

Aquaculture

13. notes that aquaculture has recently become an important area of the blue economy. It is a sector with significant potential, both for the economy and for environmental protection. It also has the potential to create jobs, to offer new opportunities for economic development to people in coastal and rural areas, and that some aquaculture practices such as mussel farms help to mitigate the effects of climate change and protect ecosystems with the use of low impact practices;
14. welcomes the Commission's Communication on Strategic guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture, and stresses the important contribution of aquaculture to meeting the challenge of providing high-quality food and ensuring the supply of marine and freshwater products to a growing market as long as that does not impact negatively on wild fish stocks and that promotes the implementation of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy and the development of a sustainable blue economy;

15. welcomes the presentation of the strategy on animal welfare, in particular on the definition of verifiable indicators, the provision of training for producers, research into species-specific animal welfare parameters and diversification away from monocultures; stresses that it is now up to the Member States to update their national plans in line with the new guidelines;
16. stresses the importance of the specific objectives for aquaculture set out in the Farm to Fork Strategy, in particular with regard to reducing sales of antimicrobials and significantly increasing organic aquaculture; welcomes the Commission's intention to take measures to reduce the total sales of antimicrobials for farmed animals and aquaculture by 50% by 2030;
17. notes that EU strategies and other legal documents contain guidelines and recommendations on developing the sector, but points out that local and regional authorities that do not have exclusive competences in the sector do not have more detailed analysis on how aquaculture is to be developed, based on practical knowledge, more accurate data and specific measures;
18. stresses that sustainable development is the main prerequisite for developing aquaculture; therefore calls for a clear definition of the term "sustainable aquaculture", taking into account environmental, social and economic criteria. A long-term strategic approach to the sustainable growth of EU aquaculture would contribute to the recovery of the sector following the COVID-19 crisis and ensure long-term sustainability and resilience;
19. reiterates that aquaculture should be recognised as a specific policy area, with sufficient funding so that it provides a complement to traditional fisheries; notes that the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund has for many years provided for the promotion of sustainable aquaculture activities and the processing and marketing of aquaculture products; also believes that organic aquaculture should be promoted by supporting local markets for European aquaculture products and by reducing the administrative burden that is hampering the efficient development of the sector. General guidelines should also be established for streamlined access to space, particularly coastal space, so that it can be developed. These guidelines should be compatible with other policies such as those relating to the environment;
20. welcomes the Commission's call for the EU Member States to include the increase in organic aquaculture production in their national strategic plans for aquaculture and to earmark a portion of the resources of the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund for this purpose;
21. reiterates the need to accelerate the transition to sustainable fish farming, alongside changes in agriculture, as fisheries and aquaculture are important elements of sustainable food systems; also supports the objective of promoting ecofriendly fishing restoring fish populations and protecting marine ecosystems by boosting environmentally sustainable and affordable, and socially sustainable and competitive fishing activities;
22. calls for objectives which are legally binding at EU level with a view to restoring and preserving marine biodiversity and putting right damaged ecosystems; local and regional authorities can help with identifying and designating new marine protected areas, together with the Member States, the Commission and the European Environment Agency;

Financial support and investment

23. points out that sustainable investment is crucial for the successful development of the blue economy. It is important to create a favourable environment that facilitates and stimulates public and private investment in the development of the blue economy. It is necessary to finance innovation - digital and otherwise - and the development of new products, invest in innovative technologies and smart solutions, and support new technologies, such as renewable ocean energy, maritime industries or blue economy bioenterprises so that they can develop within planetary boundaries;
24. urges the European Commission, with regard to sustainable investment in the maritime sector and in particular maritime industries, to make greater use of regions, their smart specialisation strategies and their economic ecosystems to form Europe-wide cooperation networks capable of competing with international players. These networks, under the European Sea Tech label, should be able to respond to European Commission calls for proposals to develop and finance the first phases of their high-risk projects;
25. refers to the call already made in its previous opinion on blue growth that 10% of projects under the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation should make a significant contribution to marine and maritime research objectives;
26. points out that in the Communication on a new approach to a sustainable blue economy in the EU, the Commission starts from the principle that the European Green Deal commits to paying particular attention to the role of the EU's outermost regions; calls on the Commission to implement this commitment by drawing up a specific action plan with the funding envisaged;
27. regrets that the blue economy's potential, including its potential major contribution to achieving the objectives of the Green Deal, has not been sufficiently taken into account in the review of the recovery plans financed by NextGenerationEU, such as direct European funding for structural projects and risky projects, and the establishment of regional investment platforms;
28. believes that the concept of sustainable investment must be understood as requiring joint efforts, from both industry and national governments, with regard to technological progress and scientific research, in order to invest in projects that combine social, economic and environmental benefits. Cooperation between academia and industry is of particular importance in this area;
29. welcomes the Commission's plans to step up cooperation with European financial institutions in order to promote public and private investment, and draws attention to the importance of the BlueInvest platform and the resources earmarked for the EU funds and the specific programmes of the EU budget for developing the sector, and proposes assessing whether a single fund or single tool for coordinated access to funds can be created;
30. welcomes the Commission's call for the Member States to include investment in a sustainable blue economy in their national resilience and recovery plans and in the national operational programmes of the various EU funds;

31. considers it particularly important to promote the use of innovative financial tools when developing sustainable aquaculture, to support investment in advanced technologies, to create favourable conditions for private sector involvement and to allocate funds for research and technological development in order to promote diversification and innovation in sustainable aquaculture;
32. calls for a review of the rules on awarding EU funding, and believes that the main criteria for awarding support should be innovation, value creation and most importantly implementing sustainable solutions;
33. deems it necessary to explore the possibility of classifying low-impact aquaculture as ecological, including in recirculation systems, and to provide financial support for its further development, if the relevant criteria for energy and resource consumption, animal welfare and sustainable waste recycling are met. It is currently difficult for aquaculture to benefit from EU funds, despite the fact that it has been shown in practice that the innovative technologies used make it possible to meet the highest environmental requirements in the relevant technical processes (e.g. the waste generated, such as sludge, can be used in agriculture, waste water is cleaned to the highest standards and reused, etc.);
34. points out that financing issues are particularly important for small countries with less investment, lower GDP and more limited opportunities for innovation, and notes that it would be appropriate to assess the needs of small countries and to adopt special support schemes;

Role of local and regional authorities

35. stresses the important role of local and regional authorities in the transition to a green economy. Regional governments could make a significant contribution to achieving the objectives of the Green Deal by participating actively in decision-making and effectively managing cohesion and environmental innovation funds;
36. deplores the fact that, in most countries, regional governments are not involved in developing and implementing national policies and that a centralised approach predominates whereby the highest level determines needs and takes decisions without consulting regions on the development of the maritime economy; therefore calls on the European Commission and national governments to treat local and regional authorities as equal partners at a central level when implementing further measures in this area;
37. reiterates its call for the European Commission to submit to the Member States a proposal for rules on how local and regional authorities should be involved in identifying, developing, planning and managing policies, and to provide them with greater, more clearly defined powers. Greater involvement of local authorities would ensure better development of a sustainable blue economy by developing dynamic and sustainable blue economy ecosystems, promoting innovation, applying smart solutions and creating jobs;
38. welcomes the European Commission's intention to support coastal cities and regions in managing the green and digital transformation at local level and in making full use of the funds and incentives provided by the EU by developing a recovery support package (a "blueprint for local green deals") and strategic guidelines (e.g. the Intelligent Cities Challenge);

39. proposes the development of a legal and budgetary framework that can act as an incentive for the drafting and development of regional and local blue economy strategies that take into consideration the variety of activities in this field with compatibility between them being the starting principle, especially compatibility with existing activities. In particular, the importance of technological developments linked to the maritime industries and energy production must be conveyed along with the importance of producing quality marine protein as a global competition factor;
40. stresses that local and regional authorities have an important role to play in developing European aquaculture. In the field of fisheries, local and regional authorities are often responsible for the authorisation procedure and for managing and providing support to small and medium-sized enterprises operating on their territory, thus building up extensive experience in these areas. This proximity to the sector provides experience that must be recognised, coordinated and put to good use;
41. believes that local authorities should be more involved in developing aquaculture policy and reiterates that regions need clear guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture as well as a detailed action plan;
42. regrets that the Interreg budget for territorial cooperation has been reduced, as it could have boosted cooperation between coastal regions and islands with common needs within the same sea basin in order to develop adaptation strategies and common approaches to coastal zone management, invest in sustainable coastal defences and adapt coastal economic activities. Considers however that although the budget has been reduced, the policies have also been made more effective through pilot schemes and investments and by coordinating with programmes under direct management, enabling the sector to tap fresh ideas;
43. therefore, where possible and in line with the wishes of local and regional authorities, calls for sea basin strategies to be made standard practice as they provide essential frames of reference. These strategies must be taken into account when devising smart specialisation strategies and in EU fund programming;
44. considers that it is vital to keep working towards the objective of zero-emission ports, as set out in the European Commission's sustainable and smart mobility strategy, and proposes that ports be fully recognised as platforms for the blue economy and levers for the development of the maritime industry;

Maritime spatial planning and importance of ports

45. notes that the development of a sustainable blue economy, including aquaculture, fishing and shellfishing, is only possible if the necessary areas are available and businesses have access to waters. Access to areas where economic activities are possible and access to waters remain a major challenge when it comes to developing European aquaculture. It is therefore of the utmost importance to ensure adequate maritime spatial planning through coordination and by involving relevant stakeholders as early as possible;

46. reiterates the call for proposals to be drawn up aimed at establishing maritime spatial planning and the establishment of marine protected areas and ecological corridors in line with the objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy, making it possible to reverse biodiversity loss and help mitigate climate change and build resilience thereto, while bringing considerable financial and social benefits, with the aim of achieving a balance between exploiting fish stocks and the sea's capacity to replenish those stocks;
47. calls for legally binding EU targets to restore and preserve marine biodiversity and ecosystems; local and regional authorities can help in the identification and designation of additional marine protected areas;
48. points to the important role of ports, especially in remote regions, such as the outermost regions, in developing and promoting the blue economy, managing the circular economy and implementing green solutions that help achieve the objectives of the Green Deal;
49. considers, for instance, that during the green transition, no time must be lost in stepping up support for investment in ports for LNG refuelling for ships and, more broadly, for infrastructure helping to reduce ships' carbon footprint (power connections at quayside based on low-emission technologies);
50. lastly, calls for the EU's energy policy and the hydrogen corridors currently being rolled out to do more to support and integrate the development of green hydrogen generation in ports;
51. recalls the importance of the role that ports could play (given the diversity of their maritime activities) in promoting the blue economy, and in developing strategies in this area;
52. considers that ports, as important links in transport chains and economic cycles between countries, should henceforth become energy centres, using at the same time renewable energy sources and low-CO₂ systems, thus contributing to the development of the circular economy and improving the living conditions of people living in port areas. It is therefore necessary to further develop the infrastructure of seaports and to open up new areas suitable for cargo activities and potentially novel maritime activities (e.g. offshore wind turbines, sustainable aquaculture);

Reducing administrative burden and improving competitiveness

53. regrets that the effective development of aquaculture and other maritime activities is being hampered by a number of internal problems, such as excessively lengthy and complicated authorisation procedures and limited access to waters and areas where economic activities are possible. The complexity of authorisation procedures and the lack of transparency constitute obstacles to the full development of European aquaculture, and therefore the applicable regulations should be simplified and clarified, ensuring consistency between them;
54. proposes that a one-stop shop for aquaculture licences be set up as soon as possible in order to speed up the authorisation process and facilitate communication between stakeholders and different authorities at various levels; also recommends introducing training modules on permit granting for local authorities, in order to speed up the application of EU rules;

55. notes that, in order to strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability of aquaculture, it is essential to comply with animal welfare, health and climate protection standards and to provide consumers with sufficient, accurate information on these standards on labels;
56. points out that it has already proposed a European eco-label in previous opinions; reiterates this proposal and stresses once again that an eco-label and an efficient certification system would play an important role in increasing the value and consumption of EU aquaculture products; clear, mandatory labelling of the husbandry method, catching method and working conditions would enable producers to obtain recognition of improvements in their practices and consumers to make informed decision; stresses that the criteria for such an eco-label should be higher than current legal requirements. This label could be extended to fishing carried out in compliance with conservation and management regulations, indicating that products have been obtained through legal activities and in a way that respects marine life and resource sustainability;
57. calls for the future carbon border adjustment mechanism also to cover fisheries and aquaculture products in order to provide a level playing field for the different products sold on the internal market, without prejudice to any specific derogation measures for the outermost regions, based on Article 349 of the TFUE. Calls on the European Commission to propose legislation to prevent imports of products associated with human right violations and to put in place more effective rules to ensure that fish enter the EU market meet standards equivalent to those in place in the EU. This provision aims to safeguard European consumers and to extend measures protecting the environment and ensuring the sustainable management of seas and oceans to third countries. At EU and national level, support must be given to local producers and short supply chains as a matter of priority. This is the only way to ensure the efficient development of aquaculture, fishing and shellfishing (especially small-scale coastal fishing) in the future;
58. recommends diversifying aquaculture, with a particular focus on algae farming, whose products do not need to be solely intended for human and animal consumption, but can also be used for certain industrial production processes or energy production and contribute to developing sustainable activities, as no feed is needed and no waste is generated. Also recommends exploiting integrated aquaculture systems that can help establish circular economy models within the industry;

Cooperation, skills development, information and public participation

59. reiterates the importance of involving all aquaculture, fishing and shellfishing stakeholders in order to create a sustainable blue economy. Cooperation between academia, public authorities and industry is particularly important: scientific knowledge and effective, targeted and long-term innovation in the economy improve the effectiveness of work and ensure economic development and competitiveness;
60. points out the need to strengthen the powers of the authorities operating in the Member States and to address the shortage of professionals in the maritime and aquaculture sectors. The European Union, the Member States and the regions must therefore work together to increase familiarity with and the appeal of maritime occupations, improve working and career conditions, develop European mobility for young people in training, and offer complementary lifelong training paths to convert existing occupations to the maritime environment and encourage traditional maritime occupations to take up new opportunities. In particular, in terms

of training, it will be necessary to promote tailored training for the maritime and fishing industries so as to support generational renewal in fishing, aquaculture and shell fishing;;

61. notes the absence of public involvement in developing the blue economy. Sustainable long-term investment should promote the implementation of multidisciplinary measures to protect marine biodiversity and provide citizens with new opportunities to generate an income. It is also important to involve the public in policy implementation and decision-making by establishing local action groups and various other initiatives;
62. commits itself to promoting and supporting local participatory initiatives (such as local development groups set up by local communities, local fisheries action groups, etc.) which combine regenerating marine resources with preserving local livelihoods and the traditions and cultural heritage of the area concerned. It also commits itself to promoting and supporting the diversification and complementarity of the marine economy. This should give a boost and recognition to the example of local fisheries action groups, which have integrated the maritime fishing sector with society and local and regional authorities in driving the blue economy in their territories;
63. considers that more effort should be devoted to information campaigns at regional, national and European level, firstly in order to improve consumer understanding of aquaculture, fishing and shellfishing products, their benefits and their contribution to security of supply, food security and job creation, as well as of the long-term environmental benefits of aquaculture, fishing and shellfishing, and, secondly, in order to help provide information on scientific knowledge on the compatibility of aquaculture with the marine environment and its preservation.

Brussels, 2 December 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Sustainable blue economy and aquaculture
Reference document(s)	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030 COM(2021) 236 final
Legal basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Procedural basis	RoP Rule 41(b)(i)
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	28/05/2021
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Rapporteur	Bronius Markauskas (LT/EA)
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Previous Committee opinions	
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	