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Member of the European Commission

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Brussels,
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Torsten Thiele, *Global Ocean Trust*
Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, *Ocean Collectiv*
Pascal Lamy, *Jacques Delors Institute*
Enric Sala, *National Geographic Society*
Kristina Gjerde, *IUCN Global Marine & Polar Program*
Yann Arthus-Bertrand, *Photographer*

Dear Madam, Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter dated 22 May in which you advocate for the development of healthy oceans and the full implementation of the 2013 ambitious reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

I fully share these views and I am also grateful for your support on how the Our Ocean conferences have helped foster the importance of the positive effects gained by the proper management of ocean resources. This is not only our ocean, but also future generations' ocean, and it is our responsibility to hand it over to them in a safe, healthy and sustainable way. I fully agree with you that efforts are still needed to ensure that fishing levels are at Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by 2020, one of the key objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy. This will also contribute to achieving good environmental status in European seas and to minimising the negative impact of fishing activities on marine ecosystems.

Let me first share with you the latest trends in fishing pressure provided recently by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF)¹. They show that, overall, with a growing number of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) in line with MSY rate, the European Union is making substantial progress in implementing the CFP. Today, in the Atlantic, North and Baltic Seas fishing pressure is decreasing steadily and, over all stocks, exploitation levels are, on average, close to sustainability. Stock status also improved in the North-East Atlantic, with an increase in stock biomass by 39% between 2003 and 2016.

¹ STECF- Adhoc-18-01

By contrast, moving towards sustainable exploitation in the Mediterranean and the Black Seas remains a challenge. This is largely due to the multispecies nature of fisheries, the fact that several fish stocks are shared with third countries and the low number of fish stocks assessed yearly by scientific bodies. A small number of stocks are being exploited at sustainable levels² and the average biomass is now back to its 2003 level after having declined by 20% between 2003 and 2014. Important political agreements reached since 2016 – such as the Medfish4Ever Ministerial Declaration and the Bucharest Declaration – allow for cautious optimism with regards to achieving environmental, economic and social sustainability in these sea basins.

In recent years the overall socio-economic outlook of the European fisheries fleet has also improved steadily, with net profits reaching EUR 1,3 billion in 2016, a 160% increase over the 2013 figure of EUR 500 million. Economic forecasts continue to show positive economic results. At the same time, the EU fleet has undergone fundamental restructuring both in terms of a decrease in number of vessels and an improvement in the balance between fishing capacity and fishing opportunities. As the overall improvement in the EU fleet's profitability coincides with an increase in the number of stocks fished at sustainable rates, this confirms that pursuing the sustainable exploitation of stocks addresses not only environmental but also social and economic concerns.

During the remainder of my tenure as Commissioner, I will continue to pursue my commitment in leading the full implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy. For the Mediterranean and Black Seas, we will continue to align the national management plans adopted under the 2006 Mediterranean Regulation with the CFP. Better control and enforcement will also be a priority with a revised legislative proposal now on the table for discussion by the co-legislators. At the international level, we aim to translate the political commitments of the 'Malta MedFish4Ever Declaration' and the Sofia Declaration into concrete actions. We also aim to reach agreement on a regional management plan for European eel and conservation measures for demersal fisheries in the Central-Eastern Mediterranean, as well as small pelagic species in the Adriatic.

In terms of governance, the CFP promotes decentralisation of fisheries management through regionalisation, including through the different multiannual management plans (MAP). The recent adoption of a MAP for demersal fisheries in the North Sea is an important development that will help ensure sustainable fisheries in the long term. This is the second MAP agreed after the Baltic MAP in 2016. By contrast, the MAP for sardines and anchovies in the Adriatic Sea proposed by the Commission in 2017 has still not been subject to an agreement by the European Parliament and the Council. We will continue working closely with all parties concerned to facilitate discussions so that measures can be put in place as soon as possible to protect these stocks in a critical state. In March 2018, the Commission proposed also two new MAPs (one for fisheries of demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean Sea and one for demersal species in Western Waters). We will work closely with co-legislators to reach an agreement on these two proposals, possibly before the end of the European Parliament's legislative term.

Another big challenge ahead of us is getting rid of the wasteful practice of discards through the implementation of the landing obligation that will enter into force on 1 January 2019 for all species subject to catch limits and in the Mediterranean also for all species subject to minimum conservation reference size. The phasing-in of the landing obligation further progressed in 2018. Pelagic fisheries and fisheries in the Baltic and Black Sea are already fully under the landing obligation. For demersal fisheries, there has been an overall increase of the scope of the landing obligation in volume from 35% to 44%. In the Mediterranean,

² For example, deep-water rose shrimp in Western Mediterranean and red mullet in the Black Sea

around 66 % of the total landings are currently under the landing obligation while in the Black Sea, since 2017, the landing obligation covers all catches of the species subject to TAC, i.e. sprat and turbot. I am confident that we are on good track towards the full implementation of the landing obligation by 2019 and we are working closely with the Member States to that end.

Achieving our MSY objectives and the landing obligation in parallel will not be plain sailing. Nevertheless, I am confident we can find ways to make it work. Your support in this context is essential, particularly in the coming months. Now is the time to ensure that the necessary measures are in place to both ensure a sustainable and competitive future for the EU fisheries sector and ensure a healthy marine environment.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Karmenu Vella', with a stylized, cursive script.

Karmenu Vella