

No time for empty promises: Europe must lead on harmful fisheries subsidies

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Rashid Sumaila is a University of British Columbia professor and director of the fisheries economics research unit at the school's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries. Daniel Pauly is a professor of fisheries at the University of British Columbia.

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By adopting the Council conclusions on the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 last month, member states agreed to combat overfishing and the involuntary (or not) capture of sensitive and threatened species, including through the WTO negotiations on a global agreement to ban subsidies that are directly harmful to the sustainability of fish stocks.

It is now time for the EU to step up its efforts to address the challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change and ocean degradation by removing subsidies that stimulate overexploitation of fish populations.

This should be a fait accompli. In June, the European Parliament called for the EU to respect the "do no harm" principle and stop financially supporting activities that work against their climate, environment, and biodiversity goals. Since harmful fishing subsidies are a key driver of overfishing, they clearly violate this principle.

An ambitious agreement at WTO to end those subsidies could mark a turning point for enhancing ocean health. Reaching a deal by the end of the year would also achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 Target 6, in which countries committed to eliminate destructive fisheries subsidies by 2020.

That's why it is so disappointing that the proposal the EU presented to the WTO negotiations includes exceptions that would allow Europe to continue pouring public funds into practices that incentivize irresponsible fishing by industrial fleets. The loopholes are so big you could steer an industrial fishing vessel straight through them.

The EU needs to stop hiding behind such weak language, strengthen its own position against harmful subsidies, and encourage other WTO Member States to do the same. In other words, be a leader by taking responsibility.

To protect life in European waters and throughout the global ocean, it's critical that the EU weans itself off harmful subsidies. But ending harmful fisheries subsidies doesn't mean ending support for fishers themselves. I

It is irresponsible to spend taxpayers' money to deplete valuable public goods; over time, that hurts fishers – in Europe and beyond. Public funds should instead be used to help sustainably manage our precious marine resources.

Overfishing is a major threat not only to ocean ecosystems but also to the global economy and the fishing communities that rely on marine resources for their livelihoods.

The United Nations fifth “Global Biodiversity Outlook,” released in September, noted that over 34% of the world’s marine fish stocks are being fished beyond their biologically sustainable limits, continuing a trend that has soared from just 10% in 1974.

Worldwide, nearly €30 billion was invested in public subsidies to support the fisheries sector in 2018. Our research at the University of British Columbia classified €19 billion of that as harmful subsidies that increase the fishing capacity of mainly large, industrial fleets and contribute to the overexploitation of marine resources.

The EU is the second-largest subsidizer in the world, handing out €3.25 billion in 2018, of which at least €1.7 billion were considered harmful subsidies.

For decades, Europe has invested public money in the construction or modernization of vessels to make them more powerful and increase their fishing capacity, and the EU continues to subsidize fuel consumption through tax exemptions.

Moreover, on the domestic front, EU institutions have proposed introducing harmful subsidies into the portfolio of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, which will spend €6 billion on ocean-related activities between 2021 and 2027. This would be hard to reconcile with a firm stance at WTO and damage the EU’s own green credentials.

Europe’s Green Deal calls for a just and inclusive transition to a sustainable economy that decouples growth from resource use, a policy cornerstone of European Commission President von der Leyen’s administration.

If the EU is serious about making these political commitments a reality, it must take tangible steps to recover degraded ocean systems and help local fishers harmed by overfishing. Future investments in the EU’s fishing sector must support activities that are fully sustainable, creating long-term jobs, protecting marine biodiversity, and strengthening fisheries.

At the start of her term in 2019, President von der Leyen tasked the Trade and Environment Commissioners with ensuring “that Europe leads discussions in the World Trade Organization on finding a global agreement to ban fisheries subsidies that contribute to overfishing, illegal fishing and overcapacity.”

The EU’s lack of ambition in the WTO discussions to date means von der Leyen’s mandate is in danger of being undermined or, even worse, rejected.

With less than 40 days 2020 deadline, Europe must step up and push for an ambitious WTO agreement. No more get-out clauses and empty promises.

Now is the time for the EU to show that it is a true leader in sustainability and stop providing harmful subsidies that are decimating fish populations, destroying marine food chains, and hurting fishing communities around the world.

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