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Check Against Delivery
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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

A new era of co-operation

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Madame Chair, Honourable Members,

Let me begin by thanking you for your invitation to address this first meeting of the new European Parliament Fisheries Committee and by congratulating you all on your election to this illustrious institution. The European Parliament has always been a standard-bearer for the values which underpin the European Union. I feel sure that you will continue that tradition.

I am pleased that you have chosen to sit on the Fisheries Committee. As I look around I can see some new faces and some familiar ones too – not least your well-respected and experienced chairperson, Madame Fraga. I hope that you will find your important work on this committee as rewarding as it will be challenging.

With this new Parliament soon to be joined by a new Commission, and with a new, committed Fisheries Committee in place, we can enter a new era of cooperation as we strive to restore our vital fisheries industry and our precious marine environment to full health.

I would like to take this opportunity to survey some of the issues and challenges that you and the Commission will be called to work on over the next few years.

Surely the biggest item on our agenda is the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. A public consultation on this subject is now in full swing, and the Commission is determined to make this an all-inclusive, no-holds-barred debate. I know that my successor can rely on this Committee to work hand-in-hand with you to see this process through.

I don't need to rehearse for you the problems facing Europe's fisheries. We all know too well that the present system is still failing to deliver, despite substantial progress in certain key areas over recent years. What we need now are real solutions to the underlying systemic problems. Our goal must be a profitable fishing industry that provides nutritious food for our citizens taken from a healthy marine environment.

If we are to achieve this, I believe there are three 'pillars' we must put in place. We need to re-order the priorities on which the CFP is based. We need to put an end to the chronic overcapacity of the European fishing fleet. And we need to redistribute responsibility to make sure that we deliver on our goals.

Despite some real progress, CFP decision-making remains too reactive. We need to keep focus on the bigger picture. Ecological sustainability must be our core principle which must not be compromised for short-term gain. Without ecological sustainability, there can be no future for the fishing industry, or for the coastal communities

that depend upon it. The ecosystem is not a luxury; it is the bedrock on which all maritime activities, including fishing, depend.

If we recognise that ecological sustainability has to come first, then we cannot but acknowledge the need to finally tackle overcapacity. And overcapacity is not just an ecological problem: it is an economic nightmare too. It is overcapacity that is destroying the profitability of our fleets, and it is overcapacity that is pushing vulnerable communities to the wall. We need to find tools that will really be able to address this issue.

Earlier reforms of the CFP tried to reduce the fleet by using taxpayers' money to pay for ships to be scrapped, but all evidence points to the fact that this approach is both expensive and ineffective. That is why I believe we now need to explore more imaginative solutions. Could a market-based approach, based on transferrable fishing rights, be the way to introduce a greater dose of economic sanity? It works in other places in the world such as New Zealand, so maybe it can also work for us. But this would require a radical shift in attitudes. The Commission will only be able to venture down this avenue if we have a strong mandate, not only from stakeholders, but also from their political representatives -- including the members of this Committee.

If we were to take this more market-based direction, we would need to look closely at what this means for small-scale fisheries, and we may need a differentiated approach in their regard. This would allow us to better protect the small-scale sector thereby ensuring its vital role in maintaining employment and the social fabric in coastal areas, and thus strengthening remote coastal communities. I know that there are objections in some quarters to such a differentiated approach, but if we are going to think outside the box, then this is an option that needs to be seriously considered.

Such a system of individually transferable rights can be used for TACs and quotas or alternatively for effort. Another possibility could therefore be to manage stocks with effort only, replacing the traditional TACs and quotas. Every vessel would receive an allowance in days at sea, which the vessel owners would manage throughout the year. The idea here is that the skipper can land all catches. This would be interesting for mixed fisheries since it would greatly reduce discards. It would also take away any reason to under declare or falsely declare catches and would be easier to control.

I am sure that what I am saying may sound somewhat alarming, as some of you may ask "But what about relative stability? How on earth am I going to explain to my constituents that the quota rights they have built up over the past decades will simply be wiped out?". In fact these are fears that we need to address. Therefore a possible way forward is to take today's relative stability and transform it into effort. In doing so, the rights as apportioned between Member States would not be affected in any way. Furthermore, a vessel owner could decide to either use his effort rights himself or to rent them or sell them to another vessel owner. This could in turn help us to achieve the objective of having a smaller fleet commensurate to our resource base. For some this, too, may be radical thinking: but we need to explore every option we have available in our toolbox if we are to make our fisheries policy truly 'fit for purpose' in the 21st century. Of course this would not be a 'one size fits all' solution and we would have to assess carefully for which fisheries such a change would provide benefits.

Replacing TACs and quotas by effort can be a very effective way of reducing the environmental impact of fisheries, and in particular of discards. As you know, progressively reducing discards in EU fisheries is a priority for the Commission. We already have a high grading ban in place for 2009 for the North Sea and the Skagerrak and we are looking at ways of extending it to a Community-wide high-grading ban. Personally I would be in favour of also covering EU vessels fishing outside Community waters, under such a high grading ban - at least for species where large quantities of fish are thrown back overboard and the survival rates are low. I feel strongly about eliminating discards and I know that many among you share my view.

Let me now turn to the third pillar I mentioned earlier, namely redistributing responsibility. By this I mean bringing the CFP closer to those whom it actually affects. In doing so, we should also be able to make the policy simpler to administer and thus relieve our institutions of much of the micro-management in which they have become embroiled of late. One way we might approach this is by developing the regional dimension of the CFP. Parliament and Council will continue to decide the general framework of fisheries policy at Community level, but it would then be up to the Member States to co-operate within each regional sea-basin and to agree on how those principles should be implemented in detail. The result would be a policy which is more responsive to regional and local needs and realities, and which could benefit more from local expertise.

We also need to involve the industry more closely in implementing policy, moving away from the past top-down approach. By empowering the industry to "self-manage", we could unleash its creativity to develop much-needed solutions to a range of problems, while making it more directly responsible for the results of its choices and actions.

The market is also a powerful ally for sustainability – if it has the right framework to operate in. The recent external evaluation of the Common Market Organisation, and the Commission's ongoing dialogue with Member States, have highlighted the need for a substantial reform of the Common Market Organisation in order to take account of recent changes in the environment, to simplify and rationalise the existing instruments, and to enhance consistency with the other pillars of the CFP. To ensure this latter objective the Commission has rescheduled the Common Market Organisation reform to run in parallel with the CFP reform. The more we can improve the economics of the sector, the better are our chances of achieving the sustainability we seek.

One of the lessons we need to learn is that fisheries can no longer be viewed in isolation from other policies which affect the way we manage our seas and oceans. In the interconnected world ushered in by globalisation, sectoral policy-making is a thing of the past. The closer the links we can forge between the Common Fisheries Policy and the Integrated Maritime Policy, the better for both. One obvious example of this interaction is the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the environmental pillar of the Maritime Policy, whose regional quality objectives will have a direct bearing on the CFP.

Key Integrated Maritime Policy goals, such as better co-ordination of EU maritime initiatives, integrated maritime governance, and the development of cross-cutting policy instruments, can all help create a more supportive environment for the kind of sustainable fishing industry that Europe wants and needs. In the immediate future, the Commission will be coming forward with communications on the Integrated Maritime Policy in the Mediterranean, the external aspects of the maritime policy and integration of surveillance at sea. It will also shortly adopt its progress report on the implementation of the maritime policy action plan for endorsement by the European Council in December. On these and future issues we will be counting on Parliament to maintain the welcome support it has consistently shown for the goals of the Integrated Maritime Policy.

I do not have time here to comment in detail on all the fisheries and maritime issues that the Commission is currently working on, and which this Committee will be called on to consider during the course of its mandate. In particular, I have not touched on the international dimension of our policy, including the Fisheries Partnership Agreements with third countries in which Parliament has always taken a particular interest, and whose destiny is a key part of the Reform debate. I hope you will feel free to raise these and any other issues in the exchange which follows these remarks – bearing in mind, also, that there will soon be a separate meeting specifically on the Fisheries Partnerships Agreements, when we will be able to go into these agreements in far greater detail.

Nor have I gone into detail on the agenda of the Swedish Presidency, which you will be in a position to discuss with Minister Erlandsson himself. Of course I am ready to take any question relating to any item that features on the Council's agenda for the coming months. It is too early to anticipate the agenda that will be set for 2010, when a new Commission should be in place, though a Communication summarising the results of our consultation on the Reform Green Paper will undoubtedly be one of the major events of the first half of next year.

Having said this, let me just say a few words about the six legislative proposals that are currently on your table. I hope that the Commission can count on your timely assistance, by engaging with these files without any delay. For they are urgent.

The proposed multi-annual plans for Western horse mackerel and for anchovy in the Bay of Biscay are eagerly anticipated by the sector, and have significant implications for the 2010 fishing opportunities. It is important that these plans can be adopted either at, or preferably in advance of, this year's December council. The NEAFC

control scheme and the NAFO recovery plan for Greenland halibut correspond to international commitments already made by the Commission on behalf of the Community, and on the basis of a negotiating mandate from Council. It is vital to our reputation as international actors who set the pace for fisheries management, rather than simply following it, that we complete the process of transposing these measures into EU law before the end of the year. And the Fisheries Partnership Agreement with Guinea brings us up against an even tighter deadline, as the first payment under this new agreement must be made by 30 November, or EU vessels will be forced to stop fishing in Guinean waters.

The long-term plan for northern Hake is also an important one for our fishermen. Both ICES and STECF have indicated that there may be further relevant scientific advice to come, on the basis of new data, later this year, which could affect the choice of reference points. However, even if adoption does have to be delayed into early 2010, we need to move as quickly as possible immediately we have all the relevant data. For that reason, I would urge the Committee not to delay in addressing this file, so that we can receive your opinion before the end of the year.

I would like to say a word on one final issue which is of crucial importance both to the Commission and to the Fisheries Committee. The Lisbon Treaty, if approved, will mark a turning point for fisheries decision-making in the European Union. I believe that all the EU institutions have much to gain from this, and I am confident that both Parliament in general, and this Committee in particular, will rise to the challenge and to the responsibility of bringing co-decision to fisheries policy. This will entail close co-operation by all involved in order to come to a common understanding of the various aspects of co-decision and comitology.

Honourable Members,

You have taken up your duties at a fascinating moment in the history of Europe's fisheries and maritime sectors. You present the link between Europe and its citizens and I know that the Commission can count on your personal commitment to bring the issues I mentioned above and most importantly the CFP reform closer to your constituents. We need your support to get people engaged in the discussion process on how we should shape the future policy. But we also need your help to explain better to your constituents what lies behind the one or the other idea, that the Commission is bringing forward during this brainstorming process.

The European Union is at its finest, and produces its best results, when its institutions work together. Parliament, like the Commission, has consistently championed the goals of prosperity for our fishermen, security for our coastal communities, and sustainability for our seas and oceans. These goals are closer now than ever before. I am sure that you and the next Commission will work together to make them a reality, and I wish you well in this important endeavour.

Thank you.