

2019 December AGRIFISH Council: Fishing opportunities for the Western Mediterranean Sea (WestMedMAP)

Oceana's demands:

Oceana urges Spanish, French and Italian Ministers for Fisheries to show political courage at the upcoming EU Council of Fisheries Ministers (16-17 December 2019) to **adopt stronger reductions of fishing efforts than proposed by the European Commission, of at least -20% of fishing effort for 2020¹**.

The challenge of the EU negotiations will be to demonstrate the political ambition for this first multiannual management plan in the Mediterranean, especially in light of the risks of failure of the plan listed below. For Oceana, increased fishing effort reduction is justified because of the critical situation of stocks (80% are overexploited - see Fig 1) but also to be precautionary to reflect:

- o the excessive and widespread engine power fraud in the fleet**
- o the likely increase of the maximum daily fishing hours to 18h/day**
- o the poor correlation between "fishing effort" and "fishing mortality"**

The risk is that the Plan simply fails with expected outcomes too limited or insignificant, thus falling short of ambition. In the Mediterranean context, the derogations considered in the Plan combined with the weak culture of compliance could result in insignificant or even negative effects against the objectives of the Plan to rebuilt fish stocks.

The last thing Mediterranean fisheries need at this time is another ineffective Plan, especially given that the MSY objective has been postponed to 2025. In order to optimize the recovery of stocks, it is necessary to stimulate a vigorous change, especially at the beginning of implementation timeframe, to expect visible and positive effects in the short term.

Without a truly precautionary approach, i.e. with greater reduction of fishing effort, it is not only the effectiveness of the plan that will be compromised, but also the credibility of the Spanish, French and Italian governments in solving the overfishing problem in the Mediterranean Sea.

It is vital to send a strong political message for the success of this Plan, which holds much hope for the future of the fishing sector and the fishery resources in the region.

¹ Corresponding in number of fishing days to: 97,860 for Spain, 11,430 for France and 82,190 for Italy.

Overfishing context in the Mediterranean Sea

In the Mediterranean Sea, 35 out of the 40 stocks assessed were exploited beyond sustainable levels in 2017 (87% of overfishing in the region) with, on average, fishing mortality around 2.2 times higher than sustainable levels of F_{msy} (Figures 1, 2). The situation has remained essentially unchanged since the start of the series in 2003, although since 2012 there has been a relative slight increase in biomass. Some commercially important species are under extreme overfishing pressure, such as European hake overexploited more than 15 times MSY in the Gulf of Lion, France (see Table 1).

Despite the obligation to implement the Common Fisheries Policy, Mediterranean fisheries are governed by different pieces of legislations (e.g. Mediterranean Regulation EC/1967/2006) that have been largely ineffective until now. One clear specificity in the region is the absence of “Total Allowable Catches/quota” and the use of “fishing effort” (e.g. number of days at sea) instead to directly manage fish stocks due to the multi-specific character of the fisheries. Scientists have advised to reduce the fishing effort for years, in vain, as its level remained far too excessive compared to sustainable levels. The overall volume of Mediterranean landings has continuously declined since the early 1990s until today (-35%).

The wasteful practice of discarding fish at sea continues to take place in the region, all the more because the Landing Obligation that supposedly entered into force for all vessels on January 2019 is largely ignored, including by the most unselective fisheries (e.g. dredges and trawling).

In addition, the catch of small and immature individuals (juvenile fish) is a persistent problem in most Mediterranean fisheries that results in the majority of fisheries resources, notably demersal species, being captured before they realize their reproductive potential.

In 2019, the first Multiannual Plan for the Western Mediterranean Sea was adopted, thus creating a framework for to align with the CFP objectives. It establishes a mandatory reduction of 10% of the fishing effort, which will apply from 1 January 2020, and provides that F_{msy} should be achieved in the area by 2025 at the latest. The December 2019 AGRIFISH Council will formally set the fishing effort reduction applicable by fleet segments.

The embarrassing taboo of engine power fraud

In 2017, a [special report](#) from the European Court of Auditors on EU fisheries control identified significant gaps in verifying the accuracy of fishing fleet capacities, including engine powers of vessels.

Controlling the actual power of engine is difficult as vessel’s engine can receive certifications indicating power values below their maximum power. Manipulations are also possible to rig the engines during certification process, such as temporarily altering the injection system ("de-rating") or unclamping. In addition, fishing vessels also use "auxiliary power" used to operate equipment necessary for fishing or navigation and that currently fall outside of the definition of propulsion power, even if they often contribute to the increase of fishing capacity (particularly onboard trawlers).

In 2019, an [audit](#) of the European Commission revealed widespread fraud of engine power verifications for fishing vessels, and serious deficiencies in all Member States inspected. The report emphasizes above all that the power of the engines of fishing vessels is a good criterion to control the fishing effort and the capacity of fishing fleets. This is a crucial element affecting the effectiveness of a management regime by fishing effort, as in place in the Mediterranean Sea. The reliability and control of the engine power values are therefore central to the effectiveness of the management system.

The findings show that in the 15 Member states studied (see Box below for the case of Gulf of Lion), most had in place ineffective verification systems or no system at all. **In 51% of cases, the engine power measurements exceeded the certified power.** The report also concludes that *"In case engines which are capable of producing substantially more power than the power output stated at the fishing license of the vessel in which they are installed are operated to their full potential, this undermines the effectiveness of fishing effort regimes."*

Box: Engine power fraud in the Gulf of Lion (France, Spain)

The 2019 audit covered 11 trawlers operating in the Gulf of Lion, 5 from France and 7 from Spain. Figure 4 shows the engine verification results, which are summarised below:

- 1 master refused to collaborate
- 1 boat showed substantial exceeding engine power by up to more than 300%
- 2 boats showed substantial exceeding engine power by up to more than 200%
- 4 boats showed exceeding engine power by up to more than 150%
- 1 boat had evidence of tampering with engine settings
- 2 boat showed engine power exceeding by 115% the registered power on their license
- 5 masters refused to fish at full engine speed or had electronic evidence onboard

This audit also sheds light on the magnitude of the problem of over-motorization of vessels and the clear failures from authorities to meet their obligations with regards to control. It is no secret that most Mediterranean trawlers have excess power (Fig. 3).

A 2015 study by French fishermen association **AMOP (Mediterranean Association of Producers Organizations)** included an energy audits of its 55 trawlers and concluded that *"the majority of vessels are over-powered "*. The report acknowledged that the French fleet had, on average, engine in excessive power by 50%, *"which results in additional costs and over-consumption which is in no way justified by the fishing strategies of these vessels"*.

In Spain evidence of academic studies confirm the magnitude of the problem. For instance, a 2015 [study](#) in Palamós trawling fleet (Catalonia) found out that 96% of the vessels developed an engine power above their authorized licenses, and the non-declared power was estimated to be around 50% of the real power developed, although some vessels exceeded it by 70%.

Similar [findings](#) have been confirmed in the Balearic islands, where it was estimated that the average power of bottom trawlers engines has increased 6 times between 1965 and 2008. According to sources consulted by Oceana, boats have a much higher power than what appears in the official register, with 80% of the boats exceeding the 500cv legal limit (Royal Decree 1440/1999). The exceeding non-declared engine power was estimated to be 73% above that limit.

The increase of maximum daily fishing hours

Pursuant to its Article 9, the Plan also defines a **daily fishing limit** of 15 hours per fishing day, five days of fishing per week, while also providing the possibility of derogating from this rule, up to 18 hours in order to take into account the transit time between port and fishing grounds.

While the Member states will decide on the implementing rules applicable for such derogation, however if no sufficient safeguards are put in place it could cancel out any reduction of 10% of fishing effort in 2020 and even lead to an increase in actual fishing real fishing effort. It is critical to buffer against this potential cancellation effect by adopting greater fishing effort reduction in 2020.

Appendix : Figures

Fig 1.

Evolution of the problem of overfishing for demersal stocks exploited in the western Mediterranean Sea (STECF 2019)

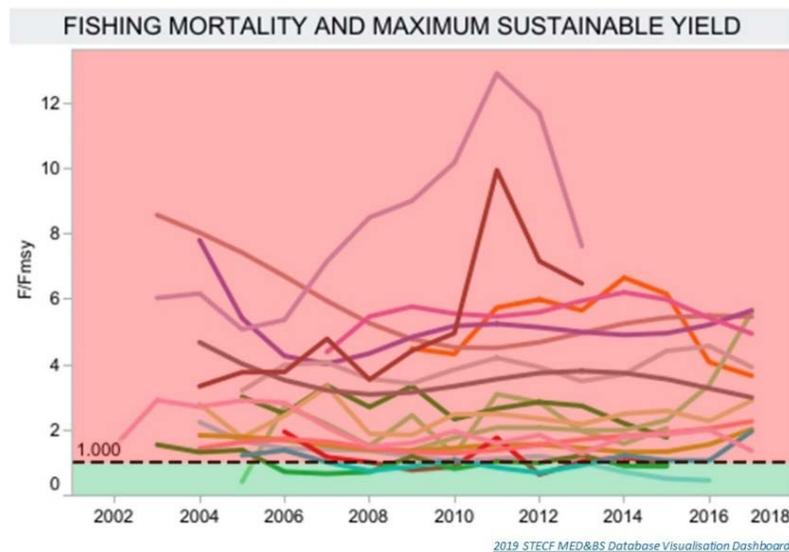


Fig 2.

Trends in fishing pressure STECF 2019 Monitoring the performance of the CFP

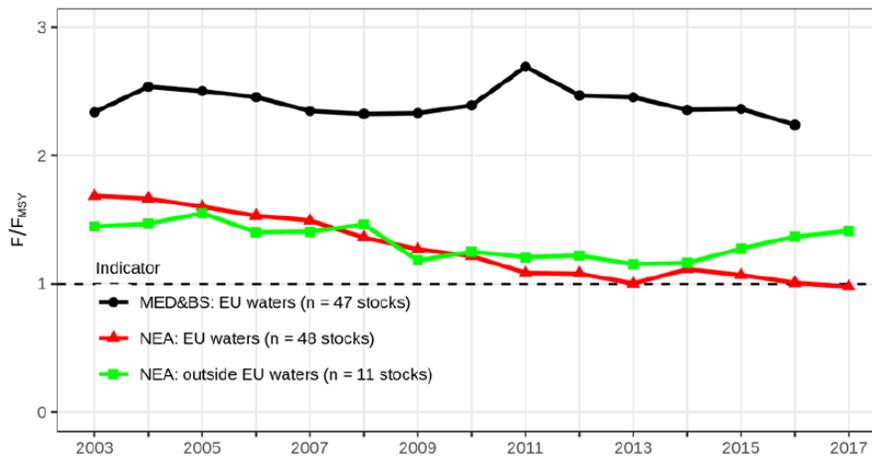


Fig 3.

Distribution of physical verification results conducted in the fleet segment bottom otter trawlers operating in the Gulf of Lion, ordered from high to low measured relative power. (EC Audit 2019)

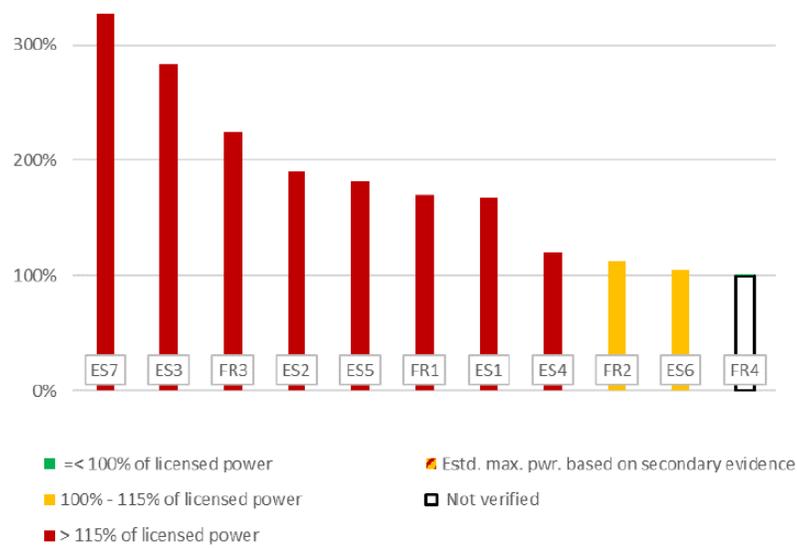


Table 1.
Stocks' overexploitation status and scientific advice (adapted from STEFC 2018; GFCM 2019)

SPECIES	GSA	F/F _{CURR}	SCIENTIFIC ADVICE**	STATUS		
				Biomass		STOCKS
				Trend	Relative value	
Hake <i>Merluccius merluccius</i>	1-5-6-7		-80%	Stable		
	9-10-11	3.9	-75% Reduce F	Decreasing	Low	
	1 & 3	6.5			Low	In overexploitation
	5	7.4	Reduce F		Low	In overexploitation
	6	7	Reduce F		Low	In overexploitation
	7	15.0	Reduce F		Low	In overexploitation
Red Mullet <i>Mullus barbatus</i>	1		-82%	Stable		
	5		N/A*	Stable		
	6	6.4	-82%	Stable	Intermediate	In overexploitation
	7	2.5	-51%	Stable	High	In overexploitation
	9	2.9	-66% Maintain F	Increasing		In overexploitation
	10	0.46	84% Maintain F	Increasing		Sustainably exploited
Norway lobster <i>Nephrops norvegicus</i>	5	5.61	-82%	Decreasing	High	
	6	3.66	-73%	Increasing		
Deep water rose shrimp <i>Parapenaeus longirostris</i>	1-5-6-7			Increasing		
	1	2.2	Reduce F		High	In overexploitation
	1-3-4	2.2	Reduce F			In overexploitation
	5	1.2	Reduce F		High	In overexploitation
	6	2.3	Reduce F		High	In overexploitation
	9-10-11	2.3	-56% Reduce F	Decreasing	High	In overexploitation
Blue and red shrimp <i>Aristeus antennatus</i>	1		-42%	Stable	Intermediate	In overexploitation
	2	1.4	Reduce F		Low	
	5			Increasing		In overexploitation
	6	4.9	-67%	Decreasing	Low	In overexploitation
Giant red shrimp <i>Aristeomorpha foliacea</i>	9-10-11	1.9	-49%	Decreasing	Low	In overexploitation

(*) N/A: No Advice

(**) for numbers, the % expressed correspond to the reduction of F needed to achieve MSY in 2020