



**Open letter: EU industry and NGOs call for sustained European Commission action to keep Thai fisheries safe, legal and sustainable**

***They also call for the European Commission to ensure coherence between ongoing trade negotiations and EU policies to fight illegal fishing and forced labour.***

The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), Oceana, Europêche and ANFACO-CECOPESCA met with Director-General (DG) Vitcheva on Thursday 4 April 2024 to discuss concerning recent developments in Thailand's fishing industry and, more broadly, the Union's policies to prevent illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing around the globe.

Over the last decade, hard-won reforms have transformed the Thai fishing sector, with painstaking progressive action to reduce IUU fishing, introduce transparency, and uphold human rights at sea. The European Commission has played a critical role in this transition; following a "yellow card" in 2015, the Thai authorities responded by bringing their fisheries regulations in line with international best practice and the card was lifted in 2019.

Thailand's progress was seen as an example to follow in the global fight against IUU fishing, but this is at risk. Proposed changes to fisheries legislation would roll back all the progress made in recent years, opening the door once again to systemic IUU fishing and human rights abuses on the Thai fleet, thus affecting the whole value chain. We note the growing and intense international concern around these potentially highly damaging reforms and recall the [letter](#) signed by 91 NGOs sent to Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin in late 2023.

As Thailand is the world's largest producer of canned tuna and a major processing hub, these proposed changes would increase the risk of allowing products linked to these abuses working their way into international supply chains, including to the EU, on a significant scale. This would have serious implications for a global level playing field in the seafood trade, undermining the EU's competitiveness and harming operators who play by the rules.

EJF, Oceana, Europêche and ANFACO-CECOPESCA are supporters of the EU's anti-IUU policy, and of high-level interventions by the European Commission aimed at securing the reforms achieved, both after the yellow card was issued and under the remit of the EU-Thailand IUU Working Group, created in 2019 to promote continuous dialogue.

Concerns related to the recently relaunched negotiations for an EU-Thailand Free Trade Agreement (FTA), were unanimously expressed by all members of the Market Advisory Council (MAC), a stakeholder-led EU organisation which provides recommendations to the European Commission and EU Member States on matters relevant to the EU market for fishery and aquaculture products. The MAC [sent](#) a piece of advice to the European

Commission in January 2024. In particular, it highlighted the risk of trade distortions created by divergence between the EU and Thailand on social, economic and environmental sustainability standards, and called for fishery products (such as tuna products) to be considered sensitive and/or even totally excluded from the trade negotiations. The advice also urged that strict rules of origin be applied. From a more general perspective, the MAC also stressed the critical importance of guaranteeing a level playing field and policy consistency.

In the face of this possible regressive and damaging step from the Thai authorities, the Commission must remain vigilant and ensure that the EU's trade aspirations strengthen rather than undermine its anti-IUU fishing policies, nor provide trade facilities to Thailand under these circumstances.

It should also allocate the necessary resources to engage in structured and continuous dialogue with non-EU countries on issues linked to IUU fishing, as far as the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the European Commission is concerned, and forced labour through the relevant European Commission directorates.

The EU must maintain its position as a global leader in ocean governance and end the cycle of illegal fishing and human rights abuses at sea. The priority must remain the same: zero tolerance for these abuses.

The European Commission has a strong track record in promoting sustainable fisheries and oceans around the world, to the mutual benefit of the EU and non-EU countries alike.

We encourage the future European leadership to uphold this legacy, and ensure policy coherence between the EU's efforts to fight illegal fishing and its trade policy. EU standards must be upheld, and a level playing field between European operators that implement ambitious climate, environmental and social standards, and trade partners that might not pursue the same high standards, must be achieved.