

Policy Briefing

Fisheries and the European Green Deal:

How fair fishing opportunities distribution can support climate objectives and the energy transition of EU fisheries

November 2024

Introduction

The increasing urgency of the climate crisis necessitates comprehensive action across all sectors, including fisheries, a critical component of both European cultural heritage and regional economies. Although the fisheries sector represents a relatively small portion of the European Union (EU)'s overall economy, its economic impact is disproportionately significant in certain coastal and rural areas, where it sustains livelihoods and communities. At the same time, the sector is dependent on a healthy environment to sustain its activities and is itself at risk from the climate crisis. The EU is committed to achieving ambitious climate targets under the European Green Deal and recognises the need for sustainable resource management as pivotal in reaching these goals. The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), a cornerstone of EU policy, aims to ensure that fishing is environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable.¹ Integral to achieving this is Article 17 of the CFP, which sets out rules for the distribution of fishing opportunities by EU Member States.

Article 17 provides a framework for EU Member States to distribute fishing opportunities based on transparent and objective criteria, including environmental, social, and economic factors. This policy briefing highlights the instrumental role Article 17 can play in aligning fisheries management with the EU's broader climate objectives under the EU Green Deal.



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The CFP and the EU Green Deal

The European Green Deal guides the EU in achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, positioning Europe as the first climate-neutral continent. In 2021, the EU enacted its Climate Law, targeting climate neutrality by 2050 and an interim target of a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Like all economic sectors, EU fisheries must be aligned with achieving the climate objectives of the European Green Deal.

The CFP is the main legislative framework for fisheries management in Europe, aiming to ensure the sustainable exploitation of marine biological resources, food supply availability, and fair living standards for fishing communities. The CFP preceded the European Green Deal, which reinforced the CFP by emphasizing fisheries' roles in boosting coastal economies and employment, ensuring food security in the EU, and protecting the marine environment.

In February 2023, the European Commission launched a package of measures to improve the sustainability and resilience of the EU fisheries sector. This includes a communication promoting the energy transition in fisheries and aiming to guide the sector toward sustainable food production. A key goal for 2024 is to publish a roadmap for achieving climate neutrality by 2050. It also issued a communication on the CFP, identifying elements where implementation needs to be strengthened, such as *“the allocation of quotas at national level and the transparency of the process”*, and outlining a vision for sustainable fisheries. As part of this, it is engaging with Member States and stakeholders to create a vademecum on fishing opportunities distribution, aiming to enhance transparency, promote sustainable practices, and support small-scale and coastal fishers.²



Article 17 of the CFP mandates that EU Member States employ transparent and objective criteria, including environmental, social, and economic considerations, in the distribution of fishing opportunities. These criteria may include the environmental impact of fishing activities, compliance history, contributions to the local economy, and historical catch levels. Member States are also asked to endeavour to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impact, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.



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Breaking the cycle: improving fishing opportunities distribution to combat climate crisis

In many EU Member States, significant challenges persist in the implementation of Article 17 of the CFP. The predominant use of historical catches as the basis for allocations and a lack of transparency in the distribution of fishing opportunities undermine efforts to reduce the fishing sector's impact on marine ecosystems and climate. It also hinders the promotion of sustainable socioeconomic conditions for fishers and strategies to build resilience against the climate crisis.

A recent report by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) revealed that “most EU countries use historical track records of catches as the principal allocation mechanism. Institutional inertia...has made it difficult for the criteria from Article 17 to expand further.”³ This approach, while aiming to provide stability for long-standing fishers, perpetuates power imbalances if solely considered as a criterion and limits incentives to move towards sustainable fishing activity. Relying heavily on historical catches can benefit heavily subsidized fishers, particularly industrial vessels, promoting a race to fish that disadvantages newcomers and disregards contemporary climatic concerns.^{4,5}

Although some Member States consider the selectivity of fishing activities in terms of environmental allocation criteria, attention to carbon emissions and habitat damage, blue carbon habitats included, remains minimal. “None of the countries that use historical catches as a criterion refers to the negative impacts of trawling in terms of habitat destruction. This impact is not considered as an allocation criterion in general.” Without prioritising criteria that promote the reduction of carbon emissions and pressure on marine ecosystems, the current system falls short of supporting the climate goals.

Social and economic criteria also receive insufficient attention, the report reveals that “several Member States use social and economic criteria for allocating fishing quotas with contribution to the local economy argued as the criteria considered. In most cases, the weight of social or economic criteria, apart from historical catches, is slim. There is no evidence of social criteria focused on protection of minorities or consideration of gender issues”. This oversight is problematic, especially as climate change is expected to exacerbate existing social and economic challenges for coastal communities.^{6,11}

Despite the European Commission's efforts to enhance transparency through reports and ongoing surveys, the fishing opportunities distribution process remains ambiguous more than a decade after the enactment of Article 17. The report highlights that the methodology for determining distribution percentages, as well as the reasons for selecting specific criteria, is uncertain and not clearly defined. A recent report from the European Parliament underscores the need for greater transparency, in particular it notes that “there is a lack of transparency and that several Member States are not making public what criteria they apply when distributing fishing opportunities and encourages them to make those criteria public and easily accessible, recalls that an objective allocation method entails the clear and unambiguous description of well-defined allocation criteria including a clear description of the relative weightings of criteria or the conditions for their use in case of multiple criteria for allocation”.⁷ Transparency is essential for effective governance and is positively correlated with management outcomes.⁸ Without transparent decision-making, it remains difficult to understand how the distribution contributes to social, economic, and environmental sustainability, as well as to the ambitions of the EU Green Deal.

A more effective allocation strategy should prioritise transparency as well as environmental and social criteria, giving more fishing opportunities to those who contribute positively to climate mitigation, ecosystem protection, and socioeconomic resilience. By rewarding vessels that perform better in terms of environmental impacts, including the climatic ones, and social benefits, EU Member States can drive a transition towards more responsible fishing activities. This is crucial for incentivizing sustainable practices across the sector. This approach aligns with the EU's climate goals and the ambitions of the European Green Deal, fostering a fishing industry that supports both the ocean's health and the livelihoods of coastal communities.

Benefits of a climate-inclusive distribution of fishing opportunities

Improvements in the implementation of Article 17 offer a unique opportunity to align fisheries management with the objectives of the European Green Deal. The EU is striving to make fishing practices more resilient, sustainable, and carbon neutral. The United Nations has highlighted that sustainable development, along with climate adaptation and mitigation, is interconnected and essential for the well-being of both present and future generations. Transparency in fisheries management is a key component in driving these changes. It empowers stakeholders, ensures accountability, and promotes decision-making that addresses both socioecological challenges and climate resilience.^{9,10}

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recommends that decision-making should integrate climate adaptation, mitigation, and sustainable development, as decisions in one area can greatly affect the others. Achieving sustainable development will be difficult unless development strategies are resilient to climate impacts. Climate-resilient practices in fisheries are essential to withstand the growing impacts of climate change and to ensure sustainable livelihoods for those who depend on marine living resources.¹¹

Article 17 of the CFP, when fully leveraged, can become a powerful tool in supporting the EU's climate objectives by incentivizing sustainable practices and promoting a fair transition to a low-carbon economy. Below, we outline four key benefits of adopting a climate-inclusive approach to the allocation of fishing opportunities.

Promoting the energy transition of the fishing sector

EU fishing activities are heavily dependent on fossil fuels, making them both inefficient and highly vulnerable to fluctuations in energy prices. This reliance contributes approximately 7 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually, directly affecting the climate and the economic performance of the sector.¹² By incorporating GHG emissions criteria into the allocation of fishing opportunities, prioritising low-carbon or alternative energy vessels, and rewarding seafood with the highest nutritional value and lowest GHG footprint, while considering the entire supply chain's impact, the EU can incentivize sustainable fishing practices and promote seafood that benefits both health and the environment. This approach not only incentivizes a reduction in the carbon footprint of the sector but also enhances its resilience to future energy crises, protecting both the environment and the economic stability of fisheries.



Protecting the carbon cycling role of fish and boosting fishing energy efficiency

Fish play a crucial role in the global carbon cycle by transporting carbon from surface waters to deeper ocean layers. However, overfishing in the EU has significantly reduced many fish populations, disrupting their ecological role and diminishing the ocean's natural ability to store CO₂.^{13,14} Healthier fish stocks not only contribute to the carbon cycle but also lead to more energy-efficient fishing practices, as fishers can complete their trips more quickly with reduced fuel consumption.¹⁵ Prioritising fishing opportunities for vessels that use selective methods with minimal bycatch of overexploited species can help accelerate the recovery of fish populations and preserve their role as natural carbon sinks. This approach also boosts the energy-efficiency of fishing operations by reducing fuel use and operational costs, ultimately decreasing the fleet's carbon footprint per kilogram of seafood caught.

Protecting blue carbon habitats and their carbon storage function

The ocean plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change by storing greenhouse gases in carbon-rich seabeds, known as blue carbon habitats. However, certain destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling, can disturb these seabeds, re-releasing up to 1 gigaton of long-stored carbon back into the marine environment each year. This re-release, combined with the carbon emissions from the vessels themselves, can reduce the ocean's capacity to absorb atmospheric CO₂ and potentially exacerbate ocean acidification.¹⁶ By prioritising fishing opportunities for vessels that use low-impact methods and avoid disturbing the seabed, through the inclusion of environmental criteria related to habitat damage, the EU can significantly reduce sediment disturbance. This approach helps protect blue carbon habitats that act as vital carbon sinks, lowers CO₂ levels in the ocean, and supports the broader fight against climate change.

Supporting social equity in the fishing sector under the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal places a strong emphasis on social equity, aiming to transform the EU into a fair, green, and prosperous economy that ensures a just and inclusive transition to sustainability. However, current fishing opportunity allocations often overlook social criteria, with small-scale fisheries, representing 75% of the EU fleet and accounting for half of its employment, less than one-tenth of the total quota.¹² This is despite the vital role that coastal and small-scale fishers play in supporting local economies, using low-impact gear, and providing high-quality, sustainable seafood.¹⁷ Addressing these social and economic disparities is essential to building resilient fisheries that can better withstand the growing pressures of climate change. Prioritising access to fishing opportunities for vessels that create jobs in coastal communities, foster local economic growth, and actively contribute to the social fabric of these regions will help ensure that the transition to a low-carbon economy benefits all stakeholders and leaves no one behind.



The ocean regulates Earth's climate, absorbing over 90% of the heat generated by human activities, and produces about 50% of the oxygen we breathe.¹⁸ It also sequesters roughly 25% of global CO₂ emissions each year, helping to mitigate the effects of climate change. However, rising carbon levels lead to ocean warming, acidification, and deoxygenation, threatening the ocean's vital climate role and biodiversity. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) indicates that unsustainable species extraction and seabed damage further degrade ocean health, underscoring the urgent need to protect marine ecosystems.¹⁹

Technical and policy recommendations to enhance the distribution of fishing opportunities and align with the European Green Deal

The allocation of fishing opportunities is a powerful tool for driving the energy transition and supporting the EU's climate and sustainability objectives. Currently, there are no incentives through fishing opportunities distribution to mitigate these fishing pressures on the ocean and climate. By integrating climate criteria and transparency into the fishing opportunities distribution process, Member States can reduce the sector's carbon footprint, promote low-impact fishing practices, and create more resilient coastal economies. It is imperative that both the European Commission and EU Member States take decisive action now to align fisheries management with the Green Deal's ambitions, ensuring a just and sustainable future for the sector.

Recommendations to EU Member States

1) Create a transparent, inclusive multi-criteria decision-making system. Create a transparent, weighted multi-criteria scoring system that integrates and balances ecological, including climate-related ones, and socioeconomic factors into the allocation of fishing opportunities. Insights can be drawn from existing models that are being promoted in South Africa, which demonstrate the value of engaging stakeholders to develop a more inclusive and objective fishing opportunities allocation process.^{20,21,22} Key actions include:



Conduct an annual evaluation of allocation decisions and their impacts on climate resilience, environmental sustainability and socioeconomic outcomes within the fisheries sector.



Involve diverse stakeholders, including fishers, government officials, and technical experts, in establishing objectives and criteria through an inclusive consensus-based approach.



Identify alternative livelihood and compensation strategies to support communities affected by changes in fishing opportunities expectations.

2) Use criteria that support climate, socioeconomic and environmental sustainability. Allocate fishing opportunities using criteria that actively support climate mitigation and adaptation in fisheries, while also promoting socioeconomic and environmental sustainability. An example of redistribution of fishing quotas to address imbalances and prioritise access for traditional communities can be found in Torres Strait.²³ To ensure a fair transition, we recommend progressively reducing the weight of historical catches as a criterion and gradually increasing the emphasis on climate, ecological and socioeconomic factors. Specific recommendations include:



Establish ecological criteria that reward vessels with a lower environmental impact by prioritising selectivity, reduced GHG emissions and seabed protection in fishing opportunities distribution.



Establish socioeconomic criteria to ensure equitable fishing access that promotes resilient outcomes for coastal and small-scale fishers. Consider factors such as economic and social dependence on fishing, protecting local employment, preserving traditional livelihoods, and creating opportunities for young entrants into the sector.

3) Ensure full transparency and public access to allocation information. Publish comprehensive and detailed information on allocation policies, decision-making processes and results, and their implications for people and the environment, making it publicly accessible on national government websites and submitting it to the European Commission. This will promote greater accountability, stakeholder engagement, and transparency in the allocation process. Key elements to disclose include:



The multi-criteria scoring system used for distribution, including the objectives, criteria, their assigned weights or priorities, results, and recommendations for future allocation methods.



Details on the stakeholder involvement process, highlighting fishers, government officials, and technical experts, and the consensus-based approach used.



Results from the annual evaluations of fishing opportunities allocations, including their impacts on climate resilience, environmental sustainability, socioeconomic outcomes, and any adjustments in fishing opportunities for small-scale fishers or marginalized groups.



Strategies for alternative livelihoods and compensation mechanisms for those affected by changes in fishing opportunities distributions.



Final annual distribution outcomes for vessels to ensure clarity and understanding of how fishing opportunities are distributed.

Recommendations to the European Commission

1) Develop and publish a comprehensive vademecum on the allocation of fishing opportunities. This document should provide clear guidance to EU Member States on implementing transparent and sustainable criteria for distributing quotas. It will serve as a vital resource and opportunity to help Member States align their distribution practices with the goals of the EU Green Deal, promoting sustainable fishing, protecting marine ecosystems, and supporting socioeconomic outcomes for coastal communities. A well-structured vademecum can support EU Member States, enabling them to transition towards fishing opportunities distribution processes that address both current industry challenges and future climate risks, fostering a more sustainable and resilient fisheries sector. The vademecum should include:



Clear guidelines on legal requirements for implementing “transparent” and “objective” criteria, including those related to climate, in the fishing opportunities distribution process.



Encouraged practices for developing and implementing criteria that promote sustainable fishing practices, protect ecosystems, generate positive socioeconomic outcomes for coastal and small-scale fishing communities, and supports EU Green Deal’s climate, social, economic and environmental ambitions.

2) Create a European fishing opportunities allocation system. The European Commission should establish a European fishing opportunities allocation system where all EU Member States can input detailed information on how they distribute fishing opportunities annually. This system would enhance transparency, enable consistent monitoring, and facilitate better analysis of national allocation practices across the EU. By compiling this information into annual EU-level reports (such as through the STECF reports), the system will enable the evaluation of how Member States are progressing towards sustainability and climate objectives in their fisheries management. This system would:



Establish a complete pool of information (e.g. for all types of fishing opportunities, fleets, species, areas etc.) that can be used as a baseline for each EU Member State to input information.



Include detailed information on the amount of fishing opportunities allocated to each individual fishing vessel or company for each commercial species in each EU Member State.



Include information on the methodologies for allocation, including the criteria and weightings applied for each commercial species.

3) Develop and publish a roadmap for the transition to carbon neutrality in EU fisheries. The roadmap should outline the transition to carbon neutrality in EU fisheries, guiding Member States in adopting low-impact, resilient fishing practices. It should drive the adoption of renewable energy, enhance energy efficiency, and promote sustainable fishing practices across the EU. It is crucial for the European Commission to guide Member States in utilising the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) framework, particularly Article 17, to achieve these goals, ensuring that fisheries management is fully aligned with the EU’s climate and sustainability objectives. The roadmap should call on EU Member States to:



Assess how their current fishing opportunities allocation decisions affect climate adaptation, mitigation, and overall socioeconomic and environmental outcomes within the fisheries sector.



Develop a participatory weighted, multi-criteria scoring system that incorporates ecological and socioeconomic, and climate adaptation and mitigation factors into the allocation process of fishing opportunities.

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Suggested citation: Oceana. (2024). Policy briefing. Fisheries and the European Green Deal: How fair fishing opportunities distribution can support climate objectives and the energy transition of EU fisheries. 8pp.

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