

The Mediterranean Sea: Advancing Transparency and Governance in the Fisheries Management



Why the Mediterranean Matters

The Mediterranean Sea is a vital pillar of Europe's environmental integrity, regional food security, and socio-economic resilience. Its waters support diverse marine ecosystems and the livelihoods of millions, particularly in coastal communities. Over 700,000 jobs and more than €20 billion in revenue are generated annually by fisheries and marine aquaculture in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region, underlining the sea's immense value not just ecologically, but economically¹.

However, the Mediterranean is currently among the most overexploited marine regions in the world. Nearly 60% of assessed Mediterranean fish stocks are being fished beyond sustainable biological limits¹. Combined with the impacts of climate change and insufficient enforcement, this not only threatens marine resources, but also the socio-economic stability of the Mediterranean region in the long term.

The European Union has consistently demonstrated leadership within the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), a regional fisheries management organization under the FAO that promotes sustainable fishing and aquaculture and governs much of the region's fisheries. The GFCM is currently falling short tackling IUU fishing, and acting on evidence of such activities with deterrent sanctions. The EU

should encourage the GFCM to adopt and enforce measures such as monitoring, control and surveillance that will protect marine biodiversity, level the playing field for legal fishers and combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The EU is committed to sustainable fisheries management under the Common Fisheries Policy, and such leadership has already proved vital to rebuilding important Mediterranean fish stocks – but there is more to do. In 2025, GFCM will implement new rules as they committed to advance with important compliance procedures – so decisive EU engagement will be crucial for translating regulations into action.

Key Priorities for Strengthening Mediterranean Fisheries Governance

1 Ensuring effective compliance across the GFCM region

The GFCM's new compliance mechanism – a system designed to ensure that member countries follow regional fisheries rules, adopted in 2023 thanks to the support of the European Commission and the Member States – is a significant step forward. However, its success will depend on proper implementation, monitoring and accountability across all GFCM members.

1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2023). The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries 2023 (SoMFi). General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean.
<https://www.fao.org/gfcm/publications/somfi/somfi2023/en/>

Some GFCM member states are failing to control their fleet or tackle illegal fishing, a problem that must be countered by greater enforcement of GFCM regulations.

The compliance mechanism, which will allow the GFCM to decide on whether to take action against GFCM members that fail to comply with GFCM rules, will go into force in November 2025.

This November's meeting of the GFCM's compliance committee will be a key moment, and provides an opportunity for the European Commission to play its part in ensuring that this new system is correctly and effectively implemented to tackle non-compliance - tracking fishing activities and following up on non-compliance cases.

To protect Mediterranean fisheries for the future, the EU should be a driving force in ensuring that the mechanism is used, to ensure that all GFCM contracting parties fully complete their obligations, particularly in deterring illegal activities.

Moreover, the GFCM must adopt additional measures, such as reinforcing the role of the GFCM Secretariat, to ensure follow-up actions in cases of identified IUU fishing to align the Mediterranean with the best practices of other international agreements. These steps are critical to ensuring a level playing field and a future for all fisheries and coastal communities in the Mediterranean.

2 Enhancing Vessel Monitoring Standards with IMO numbers

In line with European standards, requiring International Maritime Organization (IMO) numbers for all eligible vessels, including those over 15m, would significantly strengthen the possibility to track and manage fishing activity.

This simple update will bring the Mediterranean in line with global standards and supported by the Mediterranean Advisory Council (MEDAC). The EU can ensure a level playing field by securing its adoption at GFCM.

3 Improving Transparency in Vessel Ownership

Combating IUU fishing requires accurate and accessible information on vessel ultimate owner

information and history. The GFCM's Authorized Vessel List (AVL) should be updated to include detailed ownership data.

Aligning with practices from other Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) will improve governance and protect marine biodiversity.

4 Advancing the Use of cutting-edge Monitoring Methods

Innovative approaches such as electronic monitoring systems (REM) and at-sea human observer programs are essential for improving fisheries oversight, data collection, and support compliance with conservation measures, safeguarding Mediterranean fisheries.

The EU should encourage the GFCM to establish a dedicated working group to develop a roadmap for a regional observer and/or REM program.

The Role of the European Parliament

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have an important role in ensuring that there is momentum and support for effective fisheries governance in the Mediterranean. MEPs have attended GFCM annual meetings in the past - such engagement is important to make sure Member States and the European Commission prioritise having both level playing field and the culture of compliance at GFCM. MEPs can support Member States' and the Commission's proposed recommendations for tackling illegal fishing and by raising cases of non-compliance at the upcoming Compliance Committee, in order to continue highlighting the Mediterranean as a strategic priority for the EU's sustainable fisheries agenda.

A Shared Responsibility for the Future of the Mediterranean

Improving transparency and enforcement in Mediterranean fisheries is essential for ensuring equity, resilience and long-term sustainability for coastal communities and future generations. Strong leadership by Members of the European Parliament can help spur the EU into seizing the opportunity to promote stronger governance within the GFCM, and to finally level the playing field for fishers who follow the rules.