Scene setter

You were invited to give a speech at the annual General Assembly of the European Association of Fish Producers Organisations (EAPO). EAPO represents 30 producer organisations from 9 EU Member States (BE, DK, FR, DE, IE, NL, PL, ES, SE), with approximately 10,000 vessels, 3.5 million tonnes of landings. We have agreed that you only take 2-3 questions after your speech from the audience, as DG MARE will be present for discussions in the afternoon, in particular as regards EAPO’s work programme for 2022. I’s main topics are fishing opportunities, control regulation, EU finding (BAR, EMFAF), Green Deal deliverables (Biodiversity Strategy, Farm to Fork, windfarms, Fit for 55).

In your keynote speech you will present the outcome of the recent October Council on Baltic Fishing opportunities (for a third year in a row the Council had to take drastic decisions, with four fisheries closed in 2022, environmental problems are taking their toll). You will also give a short outlook on the setting of fishing opportunities for the remaining sea basins (scientific advice more optimistic for the Atlantic, effort needed in the Mediterranean). Bear in mind that the Commission proposal will be adopted on 3 Nov (originally planned for 27 Oct). Finally, you will also share some general reflections on the European Green Deal, addressing unease as regards elements in the Biodiversity strategy and Farm to Fork.
Speech

Dear ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for inviting me to your General Assembly. It is always an honour to speak to an audience with whom we have such a longstanding and fruitful relationship. I know you will be discussing later today your work programme for the year to come. I can assure you we have a very similar agenda – one that puts fishermen and fisherwomen at the heart of our policy choices.

We are meeting today at a crucial moment for fisheries in Europe. COP26 is just ahead of us, probably the most important international conference in years. The outcome will define how the world will look like a few decades from now, on land but also at sea. Closer to home, we are in the middle of the fishing opportunities season, with the Baltic Sea negotiations already behind us and those for the other sea basins coming soon.

So these are exciting times, I’m sure for you as much as for me. And more than ever, we will have to work closely together to ensure a sustainable and profitable future for our fishermen and women.

I would like to spend a moment to talk about the 2022 Baltic fishing opportunities first, before looking ahead to the other upcoming negotiations on fishing opportunities, and I will ultimately share some reflections on our overarching political framework – the European Green Deal, which I understand you will also be discussing with DG MARE later in the day.

[Baltic FO 2022]

As you know the Council of Ministers decided on the fishing opportunities for the Baltic Sea for 2022 earlier this month.

I would like to thank you for your recommendations, which you’ve sent to me ahead of the Council meeting.
You know well that the situation in the Baltic has been very difficult for years, and unfortunately, it continues to deteriorate.

Out of 10 TACs, ICES issued zero catch advice for three of them: eastern cod, western herring and main basin salmon. In addition, for western cod ICES issued almost a zero-catch advice and I hope that with the measures decided by the Council, we can avoid a zero-catch advice next year.

In any case, the Council followed the Commission proposal and closed the directed fisheries for these four stocks - although salmon is a special case since normal fishing can continue from May to August in the coastal areas of the Gulf of Bothnia and the Aland Sea.

Moreover, central herring also had to be reduced substantially for the second year in a row. The 2022 TAC level is about 30% of what it was in 2019.

So many valuable stocks cannot be targeted at all anymore, while for others the TACs had to be substantially reduced. There were directed fisheries on those stocks just a few years ago. This is obviously a very big problem for the fishing industry and the related sectors. In the long run, an industry cannot survive on by-catch TACs alone.

On average, most Baltic fleets should nevertheless continue to be profitable in 2022, although behind that average, there are big differences between Member States and fleet segments. Some Member States such as Poland and Germany will be hit quite hard, and many small-scale coastal fisheries are expected to remain in a particularly difficult situation.

So what can we do?

First of all, let me clarify one thing. **Increasing the TACs is not an option.**

It would be illegal, but most of all it just does not make any sense, biologically and economically speaking. Many fish stocks have substantially decreased in recent years and they have problems to reproduce. That is,
unfortunately, the reality. The ICES advice for those stocks is clear, and ignoring it would make things even worse and greatly jeopardise the future of fishing in the Baltic. In the end, it’s very simple: **if there is no fish, there will be no fishery.**

I sometimes hear people arguing that fisheries are also not possible if there are no fishers. This kind of circular reasoning is not helpful. Fishing exists purely by the grace of healthy fish stocks, all the rest follows from it. You can’t negotiate your way out of a biological reality. Just look at the example of cod in North America, which shows that fish stocks might not come back at all once they’ve been depleted.

So, as I said, increasing the TACs is not the right answer to save our fisheries sector in the Baltic. But at the same time, we also know that **there are other environmental factors at play.** The main issue is probably eutrophication, and this is not caused by overfishing but by people and businesses disregarding environmental policies on land. Policies also based on science, urging us to drastically reduce pollution from nutrient runoffs. Because we knew what would happen. So it’s all part of the same story, and therefore our solutions should also be part of a comprehensive approach.

Concretely, the following four things need to be done.

First, together with the Member States we need to **collectively address the main sources of pollution, notably from agricultural land use.** The level of nitrates in the sea has to be substantially decreased. And this starts with full implementation and enforcement of the existing environmental legislation.

Member States have to stand by their legal obligations and by their commitments made in the Our Baltic Ministerial Declaration of September 2020. I encourage you to emphasize that message when you reach out to them.
Moreover, the Helcom Ministerial Conference adopted less than 10 days ago a new Action Plan for the Baltic Sea, which sets out a comprehensive set of measures.

Second, we need to maintain appropriate fisheries management measures to enable the stocks to recover and rebuild. Even if it is hard in the short term. As I said earlier, if there is no fish, there is no fishery.

Third, the fleets will have to be restructured. It makes no sense to have fishing fleets which are larger than the available fishing opportunities. Also, once the stocks will hopefully have recovered, which for longer-lived species is likely to take some time, it will be very important to have a balanced fleet and not to increase the fishing pressure too quickly.

Finally, we need to change the way we fish. I know that some of you are also active in the Baltic Sea Advisory Council. The joint recommendation for a flatfish gear that substantially reduces the amount of by-caught cod is the only possible way forward under the current circumstances, which seem likely to stay the same in the foreseeable future. I really have to commend you for your efforts on this Joint recommendation.

[Upcoming FO 2022 – EU-only stocks, shared stocks, Med stocks]

I would like now also to give you a brief outlook for the upcoming discussions on the fishing opportunities in the other sea basins for 2022.

For the stocks solely managed by the EU in the Atlantic Ocean, Kattegat and Skagerrak, the prospects are certainly more optimistic, as most stocks are doing well according to scientific advice. We however need to remain vigilant on Southern hake and on the sole stocks. The Commission proposal will follow scientific advice for both MSY and precautionary advice stocks. We plan to adopt this proposal next week on 3 November.
For the **stocks shared with Norway and the United Kingdom**, the EU has started the consultations that should conclude in time so the fishing opportunities for those more than one hundred stocks can be formally adopted at the December Council on 13-14 December. As a rule, the EU will continue to seek TACs in line with the objectives of the common fisheries policy, such as following best available scientific advice, achieving MSY, and taking remedial measures where relevant.

**On the Mediterranean Sea**, many shared stocks remain severely overfished, which is why the EU will propose additional measures at regional level in November, during the annual session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).

Those measures would include new multiannual management plans and fisheries restricted areas, additional control measures as well as measures to protect sensitive species in line with the new GFCM 2030 strategy.

For demersal stocks under the EU multiannual plan in the western Mediterranean Sea, the Commission is specifically examining all management measures, based on best available scientific advice and within the legal framework, to be combined with effort reduction in order to speed up the recovery of the stocks and move towards MSY by January 2025 at the latest.

**[Looking at the big picture: delivering on the European Green Deal]**

Finally, I want to put all this work in the context of our overarching framework – the **European Green Deal**.

Its **blue dimension is undisputable** – sustainable fishing, protecting and restoring marine ecosystems, putting in place a new approach to sustainable blue economy that reconciles the multiple uses of the ocean – from a source of renewable energy to a source of healthy protein.
I am very much aware that some of the landmark Green Deal instruments raise a certain feeling of unease among the fishing community, for example some elements in the **Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** or the **Farm to Fork Strategy**. Let me say a few words about these ambitions.

A fundamental cornerstone of the Biodiversity Strategy, is designating Marine **Protected Areas** covering 30% of our lands and seas, with 10% of our oceans and seas strictly protected.

I do believe that our fishermen and women will be the **first to benefit** from Marine Protected Areas, already in the short term. We have clear examples of such success stories in the areas of **Columbretes** in Spain, in **Jabuka/Pomo Pit** in the Adriatic and in **Torre Guaceto** in Italy. Near the no-take zone of Torre Guaceto in Italy, **fishing opportunities doubled in only 3 years!**

I will do my best to strengthen the involvement of the fishing sector to help them in the transition towards the objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy. Concretely, for the **designation** of marine protected areas the fishing industry will be involved and also for the **subsequent management** of marine protected areas through joint elaboration and implementation of management plans.

A few words on the **Farm-to-Fork Strategy**, which addresses comprehensively the challenges of sustainable food systems, while recognizing the role of fishers and aquaculture producers.

The Farm to Fork Strategy calls for an accelerated shift towards **sustainable fish and seafood production**. On fisheries, we need to continue to work towards bringing fish stocks to sustainable levels via the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), in particular in the Mediterranean. We also plan to scale up the fight against food fraud to achieve a level playing field for operators and strengthen the powers of control and enforcement authorities through the EU’s fisheries control system and an enhanced traceability system.
This strategy indeed addresses **fisheries and aquaculture**, as it provides for the transition to a more sustainable production of seafood. It includes measures regarding **marketing standards for fisheries products**. These actions will not only contribute to the already high-quality seafood products, but hopefully also help producers to better communicate along the supply chain ‘till the consumer, the sustainability performance of their products and hence getting a better price and improving their income.

**[Conclusion]**

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to leave it at that as I know that you will have an exchange of views with DG MARE later this afternoon.

Allow me just one final remark.

The European common fisheries policy is an inherently forward-looking policy. We should never forget that.

When we are setting the TACs for next year, we are not deciding on next year’s income and profitability of our fishermen and women. In fact, that decision was made long before. When we are setting the TACs, we are investing, not spending. We are shaping the future.

So I count on you, professional organisations like EAPO, to help us shape a sustainable, profitable and rewarding future for the sector. Thank you.