



How Do We Control the Fishing Industry: Out at sea, out of sight?

An analysis of Member States' ineffective implementation of EU law, and its damage to our seas.

Chris Davies, former chair of the European Parliament's Fisheries Committee and moderator of the "Blue Deal Debate" webinar series.

Fisheries policies for the whole of the European Union are agreed in Brussels through the usual legislative procedures but their application varies hugely. "We want a level playing field," say the fishers, resentful of the unfairness that stems from some governments acting to curb rule-breaking while others do not, and of some judicial systems imposing dissuasive penalties for serious infringements, such as falsifying data about catches, while others treat these matters as minor misdemeanours. Europe's fishing nations may police their own waters but if they find evidence of malpractice by a vessel belonging to a neighbouring state, they can do no more than pass on the information to the relevant authority.

That measures to control fishers and fishing practices are needed was accepted by all three guests in the fifth of the Blue Deal Debate webinar series (June 9). This edition featured Monica Corrales, the Deputy Director-General of the Spanish Fisheries Ministry who leads in her department on control of Europe's

largest fishing fleet, Pim Visser, the president of the European Association of Producers Organisations that represents the major players in the fishing industry, and Vanya Vulperhorst, director of campaigns for the NGO Oceana in Europe.

Change and improvement could surely be promoted by comparing the good practices with the bad, exposing the weaknesses and the failures, naming and shaming those countries that are allowing the cheats to thrive. But Vanya Vulperhorst pointed out that EU governments, astonishingly, are allowed to keep secret the information they hold about the number of fisheries inspections undertaken and the actions that result. Let's hope that amongst the 1,200 amendments tabled by MEPs to the European Commission's proposals for revising the Control Regulation are some that insist on transparency prevailing. "It's important that we know that everyone is taking the issues seriously," said Monica Corrales.

One thing is for certain, the situation now is not as bad as it was in the past. Pim Visser was blunt in saying that in his country, the Netherlands, in the late 1980s “illegality was the norm!” It was a time when there were too many boats chasing too few fish, and reports of illegal landings of fish were widespread across

Europe. The subsidised reduction in the size and capacity of the fishing fleet allowed profits to be made within the rules and brought some sanity to the situation.

Spain likes to claim that it takes application of the rules very seriously these days. It has increased its team of fisheries inspectors to 160 and provided them with patrol boats, helicopters and monitoring procedures to do the job. Some 9,000 inspections took place last year, supplemented by a Monitoring and Intelligence Unit that “follows the money” and carried out 50 investigations. Monica Corrales didn’t name names, but instead contrasted the efforts her country is making with those of another large EU member state that allegedly employs no more than 30 inspectors.

Risk assessment is used to prioritise the work of fisheries control. In our debate we didn’t explore the meaning of the term but experienced fisheries inspectors no doubt have a good idea which fishers keep to the rules and which do not. “Let’s kick out the rotten apples,” said Pim Visser, defending the honesty of the vast majority of fishers.

What did the Blue Deal Debate panellists think

of the European Commission’s proposals? Mr. Visser argued against over-regulation and for better implementation of the existing rules; “an attitude of compliance amongst fishers is more important than inspectors at sea”. Even so, he wasn’t categorically against the greater use of cameras, and he supported the idea that small scale fishers should have to make use of vessel monitoring systems (VMS), dismissing objections by some on grounds of cost or complexity: “They all have mobile phones!”. Indeed, everyone who cares about safety at sea as well as promoting good fishing practice will surely be surprised that the smaller scale boats that make up the majority of the fleet are not currently required to record their positions using a VMS.

Vanya Vulperhorst insisted that the use of cameras on vessels would ensure that catch data became more “trustworthy”, with automatic recognition of fish on the conveyor belts improving all the time, while the use of digital logbooks need not make life more complicated for fishers. Monica Corrales pointed out how difficult it was for inspectors to check vast quantities of paperwork from so many sources and sometimes forward it to relevant authorities in other member states. Electronic transmission should bring about significant improvements.

When I was a member of the European Parliament, I would meet with a succession of lobbyists arguing their different positions. Often, I would wish they would come into my office together so I could hear both sides and the rebuttals. Our Blue Deal Debates provide this opportunity, and it’s been interesting to discover how much agreement often exists between policymakers, industry representatives and environmentalists.