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OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	European Court of Auditors Special Report No 25/2023 entitled "EU aquaculture policy – Stagnating production and unclear results despite increased EU funding" - Council conclusions (19 February 2024)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on the European Court of Auditors Special Report No 25/2023 entitled “EU aquaculture policy – Stagnating production and unclear results despite increased EU funding”, as approved by the Foreign Affairs Council at its meeting held on 19 February 2024.

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS
SPECIAL REPORT No 25/2023 ON EU AQUACULTURE POLICY

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

1. WELCOMES the publication in November 2023 of Special Report No 25/2023 from the European Court of Auditors ('the Court') entitled 'EU aquaculture policy – Stagnating production and unclear results despite increased EU funding' as a timely contribution to discussions on EU aquaculture policy and TAKES NOTE of the Commission's replies to the report;
2. RECALLS the Commission Communication of 12 May 2021 entitled 'Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030' (COM(2021) 236 final) and the Council conclusions of 18 July 2022 on those strategic guidelines¹;
3. UNDERLINES the importance of the contribution of aquaculture to achieving the strategic goals of EU food security, having sustainable food systems and providing for nutritious, healthy and safe food; EMPHASISES that strengthening the EU's production of aquaculture products can reduce the EU's dependence on imports of aquatic food and contribute to EU food sovereignty; STRESSES the importance of aquaculture activities in rural and coastal areas and outermost regions;
4. WELCOMES the Court's conclusions that the EU's strategic framework for aquaculture and EU strategic documents promoting the sustainable development of aquaculture have improved; APPRECIATES the efforts made by the Commission in supporting and promoting aquaculture as a sustainable source of food and economic activity and CALLS ON the Commission to further support the simplification of the regulatory framework and licensing procedures and ensure their effective enforcement; LOOKS FORWARD to the guidance documents that the Commission intends to issue to support the implementation of its strategic guidelines of 2021; HIGHLIGHTS the Court's conclusion that the multiannual national strategic plans and the Member States' operational programmes have improved in recent years;

¹ ST 11496/22

5. NOTES the diversity of the aquaculture sectors in Member States, as well as the differences in objectives set out in their multiannual national strategic plans, and CALLS on the Commission to take it into account, in particular, the difference between marine, freshwater and land-based aquaculture; NOTES that the Court focused parts of its audit on a limited number of Member States and that some of its conclusions cannot be generalised;
6. EMPHASISES the importance of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) in the sustainable development of aquaculture and in delivering economic, social employment, and environmental benefits; SUPPORTS the fact that the Court's report aims to increase transparency and accountability in the use of EU funding;
7. TAKES INTO ACCOUNT the Court's recommendation to better target EU funds and RECALLS that Member States, in cooperation with the Commission, have significantly improved targeting for the programming period 2021-2027; AGREES, at the same time, to continue working on better practices to ensure effective use of EU funds; INVITES the Commission to develop, in cooperation with Member States, suitable indicators and guidance documents with that objective, including on long-term solutions for adapting the aquaculture sector to climate change; UNDERLINES that an increase of the administrative burden related to amending operational programmes and the EMFAF mid-term evaluation must be avoided to the greatest extent possible;
8. STRESSES that EU funds are an important factor in minimising the different environmental impacts of the aquaculture sector; EMPHASISES that support to aquaculture in the EU should contribute to its social, economic and environmental sustainability and not jeopardise competitiveness;
9. TAKES INTO ACCOUNT the possible impact of aquaculture on the environment; NOTES, however, that the risk that aquaculture activities managed in a sustainable manner prevent the achievement of a good environmental status pursuant to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive does not seem to be significant;

10. RECOGNISES the positive role of some aquaculture systems in supporting ecological and energy transitions in several sectors, for example by maintaining biodiversity and providing a wide range of ecosystem services, thereby also contributing to the fight against climate change; WELCOMES the study to be launched by the Commission that will focus on environmental services provided by aquaculture;
11. NOTES that there is a knowledge-gap regarding indicators that would allow the assessment of the environmental sustainability of aquaculture in the EU; WELCOMES the Commission's work on developing indicators that will make it possible to measure pressures from aquaculture, building on existing tools; CONSIDERS that the specific characteristics of the different types of aquaculture that exist in the EU must be taken into account properly when establishing such indicators; UNDERLINES that an increase in the administrative burden of data collection for those indicators must be avoided to the greatest extent possible, also given human resources limitations;
12. WELCOMES the recent launch of the EU Aquaculture Assistance Mechanism. This mechanism will strengthen the development of a thorough knowledge base and will facilitate the implementation of the strategic guidelines by Member States and stakeholders;
13. POINTS OUT that, in recent years, the sector has experienced an increase in the value of production; NOTES, however, that EU aquaculture production has stagnated in terms of volume in many, although not all, Member States, and that adequate support through EU instruments remains crucial; STRESSES the need to prioritise funds to support innovation projects that specifically aim to develop sustainable practices and address environmental concerns;
14. RECALLS that the pandemic and energy crises significantly affected the ability of producers to invest in aquaculture development and that the crisis measures launched under the EMFF and EMFAF were not intended to increase production but to compensate for losses and additional costs caused by the series of crises;

15. IS AWARE of the current challenges and obstacles in the EU aquaculture sector related to environmental sustainability and climate change identified in the Court's report; these include competition for space and access to water, water pollution, diseases, the lack of a level-playing field with non-EU countries, a high administrative burden, etc.; IS AWARE, moreover, that other challenges exist, such as losses caused by cormorants and other predators; POINTS OUT that adequately addressing these challenges requires intensive cooperation between all relevant stakeholders and sound financial support from the EU; NOTES that intensive cooperation between Member States and the Commission will also benefit the monitoring of EU aquaculture funding;
16. RECALLS that, in its conclusions on the strategic guidelines of 2021, the Council called on the Commission to present a proposal to improve the coherence between the objectives of a growing sustainable aquaculture sector in the EU and EU environmental legislation, in particular, the Water Framework Directive;
17. CONSIDERS that improving spatial planning and licensing procedures are among the main challenges of EU aquaculture; RECOGNISES the benefits of exchanging best practices among Member States on the combination of marine activities in a multi-use approach to space and SUPPORTS the introduction of a similar approach to freshwater aquaculture; in this regard, POINTS OUT the positive role that other co-production systems, such as 'Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture', can have in reducing the environmental impacts of aquaculture;
18. UNDERLINES the relevance of creating synergies and coexistence between different economic activities, without detrimental effects on aquatic ecosystems;
19. STRESSES the need to work on the social acceptability of aquaculture by promoting sustainable production methods in local areas;
20. NOTES the need to take into account animal welfare to strengthen the sustainability of the aquaculture sector and to increase its acceptance by consumers; ENCOURAGES the Commission to provide specific guidance on improving aquatic animal welfare on the basis of common scientific studies and to propose easily understandable animal welfare indicators for sustainability of the sector.