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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

of the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund mid-term evaluation

{SWD(2026) 87 final}

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Context and purpose of the evaluation

The European Maritime Fisheries Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) established under Regulation (EU) 2021/1139[1] (hereinafter referred to as the EMFAF Regulation) channels funding from the Union budget to support the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)[2], the Union's maritime policy and the Union's international commitments in the field of ocean governance. Such funding is a key enabler for sustainable fisheries and the conservation of marine biological resources, for food security through the supply of aquatic food products, for the growth of a sustainable blue economy and for healthy, safe, secure, clean and sustainably managed seas and oceans.

This evaluation covers the EMFAF including shared, direct and indirect management strands and includes the 26 national EMFAF programmes under shared management[3]. The evaluation aims **to provide, half-way through, a mid-term evaluation of how the EMFAF is delivering on its objectives. It covers the five evaluation criteria set out in the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines**[4].

The obligation to carry out the mid-term evaluation by the end of 2024 is set in the Article 45.1 of the Common Provisions Regulation[5] (shared management). The evaluation covers the period from the start of the programming period until the first quarter of 2024. **Given the timing of this report, it does not deliver a fully-fledged impact evaluation but it reports on the** progress made to date. For shared management, given that national EMFAF programmes and national rules and procedures had to be developed and adopted before the selection of operations could begin, operations formally began to be implemented only in the second half of 2023, with the first data received in January 2024. Therefore, meaningful levels of implementation of financial support have not yet been reached that would allow an assessment of results and impacts of the Fund. Such an impact analysis can be included in the 2029 retrospective evaluation, when the operations supported by the EMFAF will have been implemented.

This report therefore takes stock of the progress in the implementation of the EMFAF halfway through its seven-year cycle and indicates a way forward to evaluate its impact in the future.

Main findings

At the half-way point, the implementation of the Fund is under way in all Member States, even if the implementation rate is low. Based on transmission of data info for the reporting period until 30 June 2024, commitments reached 16% on average, with 10 Member States well below 10% and even 4 Member States still at 0% commitments at 4 years into the programme period and 2 years after programme adoption.

There is a high variability in the implementation between Member States and specific objectives. At the EU level Priority 1 has 59% of total committed amounts; Priority 2 – 20%,

[1] Regulation (EU) 2021/1139 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and amending Regulation (EU) 2017/1004
[2] Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC
[3] Representing all EU Member States except Luxembourg, which has no national EMFAF programme
[4] https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en
[5] [Regulation - 2021/1060 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu)

Priority 3 – 8%, Priority 4 – 2%. Progress is visible particularly in operations implemented by public bodies, especially for data collection and control, research institutes for projects on innovation and improving knowledge, and ongoing progress to operationalise Local Action Groups (LAGs) is noted with differences across Member States.

Beyond activation of the specific objectives, at this early implementation stage, the first operations implemented initially indicate a strong support to the data collection and control operations, the landing obligation, a cornerstone of the CFP, biodiversity protection and support for small-scale Fisheries.

Effectiveness

The delivery of the support takes time to materialise and only a few operations have been fully completed so far. Variations between Member State are significant: while some have only started programme implementation, others have already committed over 40% and close to 50% of their EMFAF allocation. On the positive side, the EMFAF appears to be more advanced than the EMFF in the middle of the programming period, indicating that Member States expect to make considerable headway in 2025 in most cases. The EMFAF faces challenges, notably in terms of organisational capacity, and the need for consistent training and skills development, especially at the national level. Addressing these areas can further enhance the effectiveness of the EMFAF in achieving its goals of sustainable structural changes in the maritime and fisheries sectors.

Stakeholder involvement during the preparation of national EMFAF programmes has also been largely effective, with strong support and satisfaction for the managing authorities. However, there is room for more innovative contributions and better alignment of stakeholder expectations with the practical realities of the programmes. There is also more room for simplification and optimisation of the effectiveness of the delivery system, especially with enhanced use of simplified costs options and financial instruments, the application and selection procedures, and optimisation of the Member States' monitoring and reporting systems. Even though, it is too early to systematically assess the impact of the EMFAF, the analysis of the national EMFAF programmes and feedback gathered from the Member States show that the planned budget allocation and types of actions demonstrate both continuity with the EMFF and capitalisation on lessons learnt.

Efficiency

The novel EMFAF architecture makes a shift from predefined measures, to broad types of actions offering Member States greater flexibility to pursue strategic objectives based on an assessment of their needs. Moreover, the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) introduced flexibilities, such as the streamlining of the enabling conditions, the reduction in control and audit requirements and the simplified identification of programme authorities, aiming to make the programming and implementation of the CPR Funds more efficient.

The EMFAF provides for the possibility to trigger a crisis mechanism, which would result in compensation in case of exceptional events causing a significant disruption of markets. Moreover, the EMFAF's Monitoring and Evaluation system has improved considerably compared to the previous programming period, through the early development of indicators in consultation with the Member States, the provision of guidance on the indicators and the performance framework methodology for target setting. The EMFAF is expected to provide more reliable data and show more concretely how the Fund contributes to the objectives of the CFP as well as to the horizontal policy priorities of resilience, green and digital transition. These contributions are expected to become clearer in the context of the retrospective evaluation.

Despite steps taken at the EU and national level to simplify the Fund and its implementation, administrative costs are assessed to have increased overall. While these costs are considered justified in general by the complexity and legal restrictions of the Fund, and comparable to what has been observed for other CPR Funds, they seem disproportionate for countries with a lower EMFAF budget allocation, in particular landlocked countries.

Coherence

There are several ways the regulatory framework strengthens internal coherence between the EMFAF and the CFP:

- Setting minimum targets for specific CFP areas, such as biodiversity protection and data collection and control.
- Establishing higher intensity aid for certain types of actions and beneficiaries, including on operations related to the landing obligation (the maximum aid intensity rate for operations improving size selectivity of fishing gear is established at 100%), support for small-scale coastal fisheries (maximum aid intensity rate of 100%) and support for Outer-most Regions and other remote islands (maximum aid intensity of 85% vs 50% for other geographical areas).
- Establishing means to reinforce monitoring of EMFAF contributions to specific CFP areas – The contribution of the EMFAF to different CFP areas is tracked through the use of markers that are reported on a regular basis within the MEF.

This coherence is supported by Member States' programmes, where allocated budgets often exceed the mandatory minimum amounts.

During the implementation of the Fund, internal coherence is maintained through eligibility criteria and compliance requirements that ensure that beneficiaries and their projects adhere to CFP rules.

The EMFAF **aligns with and complements the other EU funds**. The degree of coherence and complementarity varies across funds, with the strongest synergies seen between the EMFAF, ERDF[6] and ESF+[7]. There is good coherence and complementarity between the objectives of **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds[8]** and also good coherence is present between the EMFAF and Horizon Europe[9] with good examples of synergies. There is relatively good complementarity between the EMFAF and the **LIFE programme[10].**

[6] Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund.
[7] Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 establishing the European Social Fund Plus
[8] Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 – rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP strategic plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
[9] Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination, and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1290/2013 and (EU) No 1291/2013
[10] Regulation (EU) 2021/783 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing a Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE), and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1293/2013

There is strong potential for synergies between the EMFAF and InvestEU as both funding instruments can be complementary.

Moreover, the contribution of the EMFAF to tackling climate change is in line with the European Green Deal and the EU's commitments to implement the Paris Agreement. The EMFAF also aligns with the Farm to Fork Strategy by, supporting sustainable (environmental, economic and social) fishing and aquaculture activities, biodiversity protection and restoration, carbon emissions reduction and improvement of products quality. Finally, the EMFAF plays a role in preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity by supporting environmental legislation, including the Habitat and Birds Directives and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and actions within the Natura 2000 network.

European Value Added

With the CFP being an exclusive competence, the role of the EU in implementation and funding is indispensable and the general notion of the common policy, the mobile nature of fisheries, and the duty to manage the resources responsibly, means that without adequate oversight Member States would not be incentivised to manage the common resources. Thanks to the investments made by fishers and national administrations, and through the support of the EMFF and in continuation of the EMFAF, fishing has become more sustainable and far fewer stocks are now overfished in the EU. In the Mediterranean and Black Seas, the situation has improved but the rate of overfishing is still too high, and more efforts are needed to restore stocks to healthy levels, also with the help of the Fund.

The managing authorities pointed out that overall, the EMFAF promotes a level playing field for all EU stakeholders operating in the blue economy sectors, and provides the incentives to support research, data collection, fisheries control and facilitate the adoption of sustainable fishing practices. The Fund can also enhance coordinated efforts and shared benefits across Member States, making interventions more effective and efficient compared with what Member States could achieve through national-level actions alone.

Relevance

The EMFAF continues to be a strategic instrument to address the EU policy priorities and national needs, by providing flexibility to Member States to programme EMFAF in line with the changing policy context and priorities. The evaluation findings show that managing authorities appreciated that their programmes considered regional specificities, which ensured they were tailored to the unique conditions and needs of local communities. The review of the national EMFAF programmes confirmed that 20 Member States have specifically built-in flexibility to allow for changes in needs and uncertainty over the course of the programming period, which shows that the Fund is now more flexible in dealing with the reality on the ground.

The two-year work programme delivered under (in)direct management is also able to adapt to emerging needs on a more regular basis and serves as a complement to the national EMFAF programmes in addressing needs that transcend national boundaries.

There is however room for improvement and more efforts are needed in addressing the social aspects and challenges of the sector which are expected to increase.