



European Union Plan of Action for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears

BirdLife position, 8 April 2013

We endorse the European Commission Plan of Action for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears (COM (2012)665 final). We consider it a vital and long overdue initiative towards tackling seabird bycatch in EU- and external waters, implementing an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, and contributing to the achievement of good environmental status under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

We commend the fact that the Plan of Action is based on the FAO best practice technical guidelines for IPOA/NPOA-Seabirds adopted in 2009, the EU Plan being the first in the world to be shaped by this guidance.

We emphasise the ICES estimate that around 200,000 seabirds are killed annually in the gears of EU vessels, that seabird bycatch is recognised by the FAO as a widespread threat causing declines in many populations, and can also have an adverse impact on fishing productivity and profitability. However, we recall that in many fisheries, global experience shows that seabird bycatch can be eliminated through application of simple, inexpensive technical measures or adaptations in fishing practices, yet such mitigation has so far had negligible integration and implementation in EU fisheries policy.

We stress that the ultimate objective of the EU policy must be, as stated in the Plan of Action, to minimise and, where possible, eliminate seabird bycatch in EU fisheries in domestic and external waters. In EU waters, this is in keeping with the Birds Directive which prohibits killing of birds whenever this is a possibility.

We endorse that the overall approach to tackling seabird bycatch should include a combination of regulatory measures, immediate implementation of proven mitigation measures in problem hotspots, increased efforts to collect data, empowerment of fishermen to develop and apply solutions tailor-made to their own fishery, and support for research and development.

We emphasise that lack of systematic data collection has been one of the chief reasons for delayed EU action on this problem, and we call for an obligation to collect and report data on seabird bycatch under the new Multi-Annual Programme for Data Collection. National at-sea observer schemes, working to an effective protocol, need to play a key role. Without the requirement for such data collection there will be no basis for evaluating the delivery and effectiveness of the plan and its objectives.

We stress that Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the Birds Directive represent the key sites for the protection of birds in Europe and we call for special attention to be given to fishery management measures for preventing seabird bycatch in these areas. We therefore welcome that the Plan states that ‘demonstrable use of seabird friendly gear should be a pre-condition for access to fishing opportunities in such areas’.

We welcome that the proposed European Maritime and Fisheries Fund envisages support for development and application of seabird bycatch mitigation measures, including through the involvement of scientists and NGOs. We support that the Plan of Action highlights gillnet fisheries as one of the key areas in need of attention to identify and develop solutions.

We call on the EU Institutions to ensure that relevant provisions of the Plan of Action are integrated into ongoing reform of the CFP and the future Technical Conservation Measures Framework.

We highlight the importance of the international dimension in tackling seabird bycatch and the role of the RFMOs in particular. We call on the Commission to continue to take a leading role in advancing the seabird bycatch agenda in international fora, and to promote equally high standards internationally as in EU waters.

We call on the Commission and Member States to implement the Plan of Action without delay.

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