

PM+: EU must close illegal fishing loopholes for vessels operating outside European waters

Written by Lasse Gustavsson on 20 October 2015 in Opinion Plus
Opinion Plus

MEPs must help end the current lack of transparency, accountability and sustainability in EU external fisheries rules, argues Lasse Gustavsson.



Imagine that you own an EU business that extracts natural resources from a non-EU country. You are allowed to operate in this third country because the EU negotiated and paid for exploitation rights with taxpayers' money – up to €180m a year.

If EU-brokered deals are not to your liking then you can always set up a private agreement. That way you can then circumvent basic EU labour and environmental laws and be free to extract as much natural resources that the country or its civil servants will allow.

Alternatively, you could relocate your business to a country that disregards international agreements or lacks proper natural resources management.

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Once you feel that the EU is able to accommodate your business you relocate back. And the best part of it all is that no one will ever know because this information is not publically disclosed.

Unfortunately the situation just described is currently permitted for EU fishing vessels operating outside the EU.

The activities of this fleet, as well as non-EU vessels fishing in EU waters, are supposed to be controlled by the Fisheries Authorisation Regulation (FAR). But FAR is riddled with loopholes enabling the easy evasion of EU law.

At the 'Our Ocean' conference in Chile earlier this month, European environment, maritime affairs and fisheries commissioner Karmenu Vella announced that the Commission will revamp FAR by the end of the year. The European Parliament must use this opportunity to address a number of shortcomings.

Firstly, in many cases, FAR contradicts the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, overwhelmingly supported by the European Parliament, which requires strict standards for fishing outside the EU.

According to the CFP, EU access agreements to third countries must be mutually beneficial, adhere to EU fisheries, labour and environmental laws, and only fish the surplus of a stock.

However, the current FAR grants authorisations for EU vessels to fish under so-called private or chartering agreements with third countries. Under these agreements, vessels are exempt from the above standards. Furthermore, no public information is available on these agreements - even the European Commission is kept in the dark.

The EU is granting vessels blank cheques through FAR authorisations and this must stop.

Secondly, EU citizens have no information about who is benefitting from the fishing agreements they fund. Transparency is vital to ending illegal fishing.

Before the [Who Fishes Far](#) [5] database on EU distant water fleets was released last July, there was no public information regarding which vessels received authorisations to fish where and when.

Since the publication of this data - obtained through an access to information request - we now know that almost 16,000 individual vessels have operated under FAR authorisations between 2010 and 2014.

This information should be available to the public under a future FAR through an official public database which includes private and chartering agreements.

Finally, EU vessels are currently allowed to freely change their flag to countries that are known to overlook international fisheries laws or management. Vessels must no longer be allowed to easily obtain EU flags or FAR authorisations once they have operated in countries that fail to comply with fisheries laws.

The current lack of transparency, accountability and sustainability must stop. In the upcoming negotiations, Oceana will advocate for transparency of the EU fleet; increased accountability for private agreements; and a halt to abusive reflagging.

Now, it is up to the European Parliament to tame this 'Wild West' FAR.

About the author

Lasse Gustavsson is the executive director of Oceana in Europe

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