The EU must turn its ocean ambitions into action, and protect those who protect the sea

Madam President,

We are at a crucial juncture for our oceans and for EU leadership. Negotiations over the 2028-2034 EU long-term budget are reaching their final stages, the newly adopted Vision 2040 for fisheries and aquaculture must now be matched by implementation, and the European Commission is preparing to propose the first-ever European Ocean Act (alongside the revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive). This is a once-in-a-generation moment where the EU can truly chart a new course for ocean protection, and for the coastal communities whose livelihoods depend on a healthy sea.

But taking these decisions at the same time also carries a risk: that vital protections are weakened, whether in the name of simplification, competitiveness or political compromise, at the very moment the funding needed to deliver them is being cut. Under the EU's next long-term budget, EU support for the fisheries and aquaculture sector would be folded into national and regional plans, and the current range of funding streams merged into a single toolbox. Flexibility for Member States has its place, but without clear conditions set at EU level, this risks undermining the level playing field between fishers who share the same stocks, weakening the implementation of common EU rules, and spending public money in ways that no longer serve the objectives the Union has set itself. We understand the value of streamlining funding channels, but the Commission's proposal for a parallel 66% reduction in funding for fisheries and aquaculture goes well beyond simplification.

That cut could have a major impact on a sector that the EU has pledged to protect through its Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The CFP is one of the world's most

ambitious models of ocean and fisheries management, but its effectiveness has been weakened because its rules are not implemented or enforced across the board. In its most recent assessment, the European Environment Agency found that only 28% of assessed stocks in Europe's seas are both sustainably fished and in good biological condition, with stark regional differences: around 41% in the North-East Atlantic and Baltic, against fewer than 9% in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

Europe already has the tools to turn this situation around. Fish stocks can recover, if the EU has the courage to properly implement its own laws and policies. You said yourself that "knowledge is one of the most powerful tools for ocean conservation". Europe has that knowledge. What it does with it is now a political choice. Do not let mechanisms that can improve the lives of fishers and the health of the oceans get diluted through over-simplification. But the challenge goes well beyond fish: 93% of Europe's marine area is under multiple pressures from human activities. This is where the Ocean Act and the MSFD review matter. They should strengthen the CFP, by setting the ecological guardrails within which every activity at sea, fishing included, must operate: Good Environmental Status as the binding baseline, prioritising low impact fishers by reserving the coastal waters for them, decisions grounded in the best available science, and real monitoring, reporting and enforcement where Member States fall short.

In almost a decade, the value of EU trade in fishery and aquaculture products grew by 18%, but small-scale fishers aren't seeing those economic benefits flow back to them. President von der Leyen, we want to remind you of the people behind the numbers. Small-scale fishers make up nearly three-quarters of all fishing vessels registered in Europe. And yet those who have the smallest impact on the ocean are the ones who struggle to make ends meet. Fishers across Europe, from Cyprus to Latvia to France, have been hit by declining fish stocks and higher operating costs, and growing competition for marine space risks pushing them out of the waters they have fished for generations. Coastal towns that were once thriving communities that revolved around fishing have now seen fishers hanging up their nets and lines for good. Young people do not want to enter the industry because it can no longer offer a stable income. And what future can the industry have, without the next generation to continue it?

This is why we are asking you to ensure that the Ocean Act, the long-term budget and the CFP protect the people who protect the sea. European funding should go directly to the low-impact fisheries that are part of the solution, the ones helping to restore marine ecosystems, protecting biodiversity and providing consumers with local and sustainable seafood. The Ocean Act and the MSFD review should make Good Environmental Status a binding baseline for all activities at sea, reserve coastal waters for low impact fishers and end destructive fishing once and for all in marine protected areas. Alongside this, the EU must deliver on its commitment to strictly protect at least 10% of its seas by 2030, because fully protected areas act as nurseries that replenish fish stocks in

surrounding waters and sustain the small-scale fishers who depend on them. Today too many of Europe's marine protected areas exist only on paper, and they are failing both nature and fishing communities. If fully implemented, the CFP can set the global standard on sustainable fisheries management, granting coastal small-scale fishers fair access to fish stocks and coastal waters and proving that Europe can boost its economy while also taking care of its waters. It is through these three levers that Europe can remain competitive in a multipolar world.

In an increasingly contested world, ocean governance is an area where Europe can truly lead. We can be proud of the progress that has already been made through landmark frameworks like the CFP and still be determined to do better. The expertise and the frameworks are already in place; what is needed now is the political will to use them. Europe should not waste this opportunity to prove its leadership.

Yours sincerely,

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