



Press Release

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Member States need to step up fight against illegal fishing

Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing is one of the greatest threats to marine ecosystems, undermining efforts to manage fisheries sustainably. The EU and its Member States have put measures in place to keep illegal fishing in check. But due to the uneven way in which checks and sanctions are applied by Member States, these measures are not as effective as they should be. This is the conclusion of a special report published today by the European Court of Auditors (ECA). The auditors recommend that the European Commission should monitor that Member States reinforce their control systems for preventing the import of illegal fishery products, and ensure that they apply dissuasive sanctions against illegal fishing both in EU waters and beyond.

The EU is a major global player in fisheries, both in terms of its fishing fleet (with around 79 000 vessels) and as the world's largest importer of fishery products (34 % of total world trade). In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU has been committed to ending illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing by 2020, a target which has not been met. However, ensuring the legality of a product alone does not guarantee that it is sustainably sourced.

"The EU has control systems in place to make it harder for illegally fished products to reach consumers," said Eva Lindström, the ECA member who led the audit. *"But in spite of those measures, these products keep ending up on EU citizens' plates. One key reason is that checks and sanctions are applied unevenly by Member States".*

In 2008, the EU set up a catch-certification scheme to guarantee the legality of imported fishery products. According to the auditors, this scheme had improved traceability and reinforced import controls. But Member States apply controls unevenly. The EU's catch-certification scheme is paper-based, which entails an increased risk of fraud; a single electronic database at EU level would be more effective, the auditors say. In fact, the European Commission has developed an EU-wide IT system to help detect fraud and to automate controls. However, no Member State uses it. The Commission has proposed to make the use of this IT system mandatory.

When the Commission and Council consider that the control systems in place in non-EU countries exporting fishery products to the EU are deficient, they can take action by issuing "yellow cards" and "red cards". When a non-EU country receives a red card, EU Member States must reject all imports of fishery products from that country's vessels. The auditors found that the card system had proven useful in triggering positive reform in most of the countries it applied to.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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Member States are responsible for checking fishing activity by their flagged fleets, and in their waters. The auditors found that national checks often detected instances of illegal fishing. Nevertheless, overfishing and underreporting of catches persist due to weak controls in some Member States. Misreporting of catches is the most common infringement by the EU fleet, followed by fishing in closed areas or with no quota allocation, and using illegal gear. According to the auditors, there is ample evidence that enforcing the landing obligation is a challenge, and that illegal discards at sea persist. They also found that the EU-funded projects they audited had helped to reinforce the fisheries control system.

As regards the sanctioning system, the auditors noted that the vast majority of serious infringements detected led to an investigation or prosecution resulting in timely sanctions. But the audit revealed the absence of a level playing field across the EU. For instance, the auditors noted that the average fine imposed for a similar infringement ranged from around €200 (Cyprus, Lithuania, and Estonia) to more than €7 000 (Spain). In some Member States, sanctions were not dissuasive enough to deter illegal fishing, because they were not proportionate to the economic benefit derived from the infringements. The auditors recommend that the Commission should work on the uniform and effective application of a dissuasive sanctioning system. Also, the application of penalty-point system across Member States should be harmonised.

Special report 20/2022, *“EU action to combat illegal fishing: Control systems in place but weakened by uneven checks and sanctions by Member States”*, is available on the [ECA website](#).

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