

Safeguarding the backbone of the Common Fisheries Policy: The need for ring-fenced budgets for fisheries data collection activities

From: National Correspondents for the Data Collection Framework (DCF)

Key message

Stable, ring-fenced budgets for fisheries data collection under the future 2028–2034 funding framework are essential to safeguard the scientific basis of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). Removing dedicated budgets would directly threaten long-standing time series, regional cooperation, and the ability of Member States to meet their legal obligations.

Background of DCF and its role in policy-making

Fisheries data collection is explicitly enshrined in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) as the backbone supporting evidence-based management and sustainable exploitation of marine living resources. Article 25 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 establishes the obligation for Member States to collect and manage biological, environmental, technical and socio-economic data necessary for fisheries management. This obligation is operationalised through the Data Collection Framework (DCF) and its implementing programme, the EU Multiannual Programme (EU-MAP), which together form the legal and scientific foundation for stock assessments, ecosystem-based management, socio-economic analysis and policy evaluation.

The core of this system remains fisheries-related data, complemented by ecosystem and socio-economic information where needed to support integrated advice. While environmental observations and synergies with the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Marine Action Plan and the forthcoming Ocean Pact are increasingly important, fisheries data collection is driven by the needs of the CFP and its legal mandates. It cannot be redefined or treated primarily as an environmental monitoring activity without undermining its purpose, design and long-established time series.

Despite the increasing demand for data arising from new and emerging policy instruments, the current and foreseen funding levels leave very limited room to develop and implement additional data collection activities. New requirements linked to, inter alia, the Marine Action Plan, the Ocean Pact and broader ecosystem-based and climate-related policies will require new types of observations, higher spatial and temporal resolution and new monitoring technologies. Without adequate and dedicated financial means, Member States will not be able to respond to these needs, and essential new data streams cannot be established in a robust and harmonised way.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the EU aquaculture sector is highly heterogeneous, characterised by diverse production systems, species, technologies and business models. Understanding cost structures, labour dynamics, profitability, and the provision of environmental services is essential to ensure the sector's economic and social sustainability. Robust, harmonised and long-term datasets are therefore indispensable. Long-term datasets allow the early identification of structural weaknesses, emerging risks and innovation needs, and support informed decision-making at both national and EU levels. The development of targeted support measures for the sector, as well as proportionate and effective funding instruments, also depends on the availability of sound economic evidence.

Regional coordination and operational reality

Structural and predictable financial support through the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) has been crucial to maintaining the essential data collection. Although DCF tasks are legally mandatory, ring-fenced budgets have proven indispensable to ensure effective implementation at both the national and regional levels.

Dedicated funding secures continuity of long-term surveys and sampling activities, enables multi-annual planning of vessels and staff, and supports improvements in efficiency, quality and harmonisation. It also underpins the strong regional coordination organised through the RCGs, which aim to e.g. harmonise sampling protocols, optimise sampling designs and costs, and jointly implement mandatory fisheries-independent surveys for shared stocks and sea basins. A concrete example is the International Blue

Whiting Survey, one of the many essential, fisheries-independent sea-going surveys that rely on coordinated effort, aligned methodologies and stable financing across several Member States to deliver coherent time series for stock assessment. In a similar way, a lack of regionally coordinated monitoring of bycatch of endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species would directly risk reduced coverage and lead to a loss of comparability across sea basins. Such reductions would not only affect scientific advice, but would also weaken the evidence base for the political decision-making processes, at a time when the CFP and related EU policies increasingly rely on transparent, robust and regionally consistent data to justify management measures and to demonstrate compliance with international and EU commitments.

Experience over the past programming periods clearly shows that such regional collaboration only functions when funding is predictable and safeguarded. This is not a theoretical concern, but a very practical one for institutes that must plan data collection activities, vessels, technological and methodological investments, and staff several years in advance.

Science-based policy-making at risk

Financing structures differ widely across Member States, and national budgetary processes are already subject to intense competition over policy priorities. Moving DCF activities into non-ring-fenced, general funding envelopes would inevitably reopen national budget discussions, create uncertainty for long-term planning and risk weakening existing regional agreements under the RCG framework. Ultimately, the continued provision of the data essential to scientific bodies supporting fisheries management under the CFP could be severely jeopardised by decreased or uncertain funding.

Current budgets are already tight. Lower and non-safeguarded allocations would place further pressure on data collection and could lead to reduced coverage, breaks in time series, and, ultimately, lower or insufficient data quality and quantity. In addition, possible changes in co-financing rates under the National and Regional Partnership Programmes (NRPPs) would increase the financial burden on Member States beyond critical thresholds and may directly affect their capacity to fulfil mandatory obligations.

In our view, this would represent a step backwards for a system that has taken decades to develop and that constitutes the scientific backbone of the Common Fisheries Policy, while at the same time seriously hampering its future expansion and its capacity to respond to emerging policy needs.

Request

For these reasons, the National Correspondents request a revision of the current proposal for the European Fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural development, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security for the period 2028–2034. In particular, they call for the preservation of an additional, dedicated, ring-fenced financing structure for fisheries and aquaculture data collection within the NRPP segments where DCF activities are implemented and funded, to ensure continuity of regional coordination, long-term surveys and sampling activities, and the high-quality data required to support the Common Fisheries Policy.

We invite policymakers and other parties involved to actively underline the importance of maintaining the supporting framework and to carefully consider the consequences for fisheries management, scientific advice and regional cooperation in light of the imminent budgetary challenges.

Signed by DCF National Correspondents:

Els Torreele (Belgium), Simona Nicheva (Bulgaria), Myrto Ioannou (Cyprus), Anja Gadgård Boye (Denmark), Heikki Lehtinen (Finland), Christoph Stransky (Germany), Nikoletta Chalari (Greece), Ágnes Irma György (Hungary), Linda O’Hea (Ireland), Maria Vittoria Briscolini (Italy), Maksims Kovšars (Latvia), Vilda Griūnienė (Lithuania), Marija Pia Gatt (Malta), Sieto Verver (The Netherlands), Ireneusz Wójcik (Poland), Cristina Rosa (Portugal), Alexandru Gheorghe (Romania), Susana Naranjo Fernández (Spain)

The National Correspondents of Austria, Croatia, Estonia and Sweden have indicated that they will address budgetary aspects through other fora when deemed necessary.