

Launching a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products

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PURPOSE : Communication to launch a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products.

CONTENT : The objective of the reformed Common Fisheries Policy adopted in 2002 is to ensure exploitation of living aquatic resources in a way that provides for sustainable economic, environmental and social conditions. Progress on the implementation of the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy makes it necessary to address the question of the introduction of eco-labelling schemes as a means of integrating environmental protection concerns into the fisheries sector. Moreover, the recent emergence of an increasing number of "eco-labelled" products raises important questions with respect to competition, trade and consumer protection policies. This Communication intends to launch an in-depth conceptual debate about these topics and to explore the possibilities of moving ahead.

An eco-labelling scheme entitles a product to bear a distinctive logo, or statement, by way of which consumers are assured that the product has been produced according to a given set of environmental standards, such as the sustainability of the resource used as raw material, the environmental impact of the production method, or the recyclability of the product.

The Commission discusses current eco-labelling schemes in the fisheries sector, such as "Dolphin-safe /Dolphin-friendly" labelled tuna and the Marine Stewardship Council eco-labelling scheme.

It details the work on eco-labelling in international fora such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the WTO. It is of the view that a coherent Community policy on eco-labelling for fish and fisheries products should be developed to address the consequences of the emergence of disparate sets of eco-labels.

The main question for public authorities is how far voluntary eco-labelling schemes should be subject to rules in order to protect public interest. Three options seem to be available:

- No action;
- Creating a single Community eco-labelling scheme for fish and fishery products;
- Establishing minimum requirements for voluntary eco-labelling schemes.

The Commission examines the arguments for and against each option. It concludes that, all in all, the third option of establishing minimum requirements for voluntary eco-labelling schemes would be the most appropriate one at this juncture. This option would offer enough flexibility and would be proportionate in terms of costs. It would make it possible to take appropriate action for greater sustainability, while allowing a gradual approach. It would also offer adequate protection to consumers.

The Communication concludes that eco-labelling is a multi-faceted topic and that, therefore, a variety of questions will have to be considered as the intended debate follows its course.

The debate will have to touch upon key questions, like:

-What should an eco-labelling scheme certify: a fishery, a fishing method, anything other component?
Should therefore single issue labels be considered as an integral part of an eco-labelling policy?

-How to ensure an approach that is devoid of contradictions whilst simultaneously offering a high degree of voluntarism and feasibility?

-How to fully use the potential of eco-labelling schemes for the promotion of sustainable fisheries, while yielding real benefits for fishermen, processors and consumers?

-Should the approach be more result oriented or means oriented?

Yet the overall objective remains to ensure a genuine Community approach to eco-labelling of fish and fisheries products reflecting best practice in this field. It is also the intention to reaffirm the Community's strong commitment to sustainability in the fields of the capture and use of fish. By means of such an approach, collaborative work with the fishing industry to encourage shared stewardship of the resource will also be a must.

The Commission invites the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee to debate the issues raised in this Communication. Consultation with the EEA members with the aim of ensuring a common approach will also be necessary, given their strong interest in this issue. Furthermore, the Commission also intends to consult with stakeholders, mainly through the Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture and, in parallel, to carry out scientific and technical support work.