



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Brussels, 24.6.2015
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Dear Chairman,

The Commission would like to thank the House of Lords for its report "The North Sea under pressure: is regional marine co-operation the answer?" The publication of the report is very timely and is a welcome support to the actions taken under the European Integrated Maritime Policy.

Regional co-operation on maritime issues has been at the core of the Commission's policy agenda since the launch of the EU Integrated Maritime Policy, in particular through the development of sea-basin strategies. In view of its economic importance and as the most densely used maritime and coastal space in Europe, the North Sea is the perfect example of why such co-operation is essential.

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive requires Member States to cooperate in order to achieve good environmental status of the marine waters in the marine region or sub-region they share. In the course of the implementation of this Directive, the Commission takes positive note of the increased cooperation of EU Member States bordering the North Sea, including through the regional institutional cooperation structure of the OSPAR Convention which is the current legal instrument guiding international cooperation on the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. The Commission shares the concern of the House of Lords relating to the cumulative and synergetic effects of pressures and impacts on the marine environment that also derive from human activities. The Commission is prepared to work closely with the Member States on the basis of their reports in this challenging and novel area.

The Commission concurs with the view expressed by the House of Lords that the management of the shared North Sea space is an issue that needs to be addressed with a long-term perspective that takes into account all human activities and natural ecosystems in the region and promotes a harmonious co-existence between different sectors. The recently adopted EU Directive on Maritime Spatial Planning establishes a framework for Member States to implement such an approach in a co-ordinated way. The Commission's initiatives in the field of marine knowledge, and in particular the new European Marine Observation and Data

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Network (EMODnet), also aim to pool resources and data from various sources in order to better inform decisions on the use of marine space.

The Commission also welcomes the importance attached by the House of Lords to energy-related issues. The need to cooperate at a North Sea level to develop an efficient and sustainable regional energy system demonstrates the linkages between the energy and integrated maritime policy agendas of the Commission. On 29 January 2015 the Commission organised a conference in Edinburgh that addressed regional cooperation on energy and maritime spatial planning in the North Sea. On that occasion, participants from national and regional authorities, the energy, fisheries and transport sectors and non-governmental organisations agreed on the need for serious commitment at political level to North Sea cooperation in order to identify clear responsibilities and therefore lower the risk profile of investments in energy projects.

The Commission will continue to work with Member States, regions and all stakeholders in the North Sea on a political cooperation process.

In relation to the request for the adoption of urgent measures to manage the North Sea area, the Commission would like to remind the House of Lords that Article 11 of the basic regulation of the Common Fisheries Policy provides a framework for Member States to cooperate on joint recommendations concerning conservation measures. If ever such a joint recommendation were to be adopted, the Commission would in turn adopt the appropriate measures within three months of its receipt. In the case of the Dogger Bank, the Member States concerned have not yet reached agreement on a joint recommendation but the Commission is hopeful that an agreement will be reached in the near future. As the processes of regional cooperation are relatively recent, the Commission would prefer to allow the Member States time to reach agreement before submitting a proposal of its own. Furthermore, Member States are developing in 2015 their Programmes of Measures under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and will identify needs and ways to address them. The regional cooperation under OSPAR will also contribute to a coordinated effort towards achieving good environmental status and should be taken into account.

The Commission shares the views of the House of Lords regarding the successful work of the fisheries Advisory Councils and would like to highlight that in recognition of the importance of their work and role that their overall budget has recently been increased by more than 20 % under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The Commission encourages the Member States to participate in supporting the Advisory Councils and contribute to the funding of the Advisory Council relevant for the Member State concerned. The Commission also considers the Advisory Council to be an excellent platform for cooperation between North Sea stakeholders.

In relation to the recommendation of the House of Lords on the fitness check of the European Nature Directives, the Commission would like to inform the House of Lords that the fitness check is at the stage of gathering evidence on the Directives' performance covering five key aspects. One of these aspects is the coherence of the Directives with other pieces of EU legislation and policy. The extent of their coherence with the Common Fisheries Policy and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive is therefore within the scope of this exercise. The Commission has always sought to encourage cooperation between Member States in identifying sites for protection under the Directives, including through its guidelines on

establishing the Natura 2000 network in the marine environment¹ and the fitness check will consider the responses and contributions which reflect how experience in this connection has influenced their effectiveness. The Commission recognises the need to ensure that EU policies affecting the marine environment are implemented in a consistent way and with this in mind has initiated discussions with Member States and stakeholders towards increased synergies.

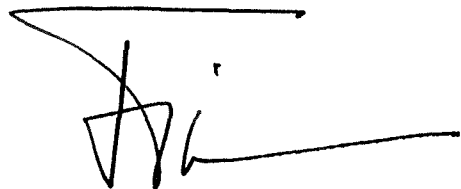
The Commission takes note of the recommendation of the House of Lords regarding access to financial resources and would like to draw the House of Lords' attention to the information published on a number of Commission webpages that give guidance on available funding opportunities².

The Commission would also like to note that it has already drawn up and published guidance for potential beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds, including the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, to facilitate access by all interested parties to the financing possibilities available during the 2014-2020 period. The guidance can be downloaded in 22 languages and the web-based version with interactive links is also available online³.

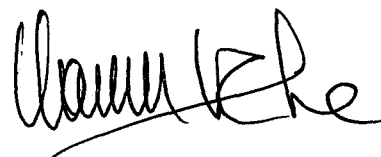
The Commission would also like to recall that for funds under shared management, Member States are responsible for managing the operational programmes. It is thus for Member States to provide specific guidance to beneficiaries.

The Commission hopes that these clarifications address the issues raised by the House of Lords and looks forward to continuing our political dialogue in the future.

Yours faithfully,



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First Vice-President



Karmenu Vella
Member of the Commission

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/marine/docs/marine_guidelines.pdf

² http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/financial_assistance/index_en.htm and
http://ec.europa.eu/contracts_grants/index_en.htm

³ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/guides/2014/guidance-for-beneficiaries-of-european-structural-and-investment-funds-and-related-eu-instruments