

Recommendation GFCM/42/2018/1
on a multiannual management plan for European eel in the Mediterranean Sea

The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM),

CONSIDERING that the objective of the Agreement for the establishment of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM Agreement) is to ensure the conservation and sustainable use, at the biological, social, economic and environmental level, of marine living resources in the GFCM area of application;

RECALLING that, in giving effect to the objective of the GFCM Agreement, the GFCM shall adopt recommendations on conservation and management measures aimed at ensuring the long-term sustainability of fishing activities, in order to preserve marine living resources and the economic and social viability of fisheries and that, in adopting such recommendations, the GFCM shall give particular attention to measures to prevent overfishing and minimize discards as well as to the potential impacts on small-scale fisheries and local communities;

CONSIDERING that all measures formulated by the GFCM shall be based on the best scientific advice available, taking into account relevant environmental, economic and social factors;

CONSIDERING that the GFCM shall apply the precautionary approach in accordance with the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO);

TAKING NOTE that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 recommends that marine and coastal ecosystems should be protected and sustainably managed by 2020;

TAKING NOTE that the SDG 14 recommends that scientific knowledge should be increased and research capacity developed;

TAKING NOTE that the SDG 14 recognizes the need to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in order to ensure prosperity, food security and sustainability for all;

ACKNOWLEDGING that states have the duty, under international law, to cooperate through regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) in order to promote responsible fishing practices;

DEEPLY CONCERNED that the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries (SAC) concluded, at its nineteenth session (Slovenia, May 2017), that the stock of European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) was in a critical state;

ACKNOWLEDGING that the SAC, following the conclusions of the joint EIFAAC/ICES/GFCM Working Group on Eels (WGEEL), recommended at its nineteenth session that anthropogenic mortality affecting the production and escapement of silver eels be reduced – or maintained – as close to zero as possible;

WELCOMING the fact that the SAC recommended at its nineteenth session that data concerning European eel be collected within the Data Collection Reference Framework (DCRF);

RECALLING Recommendation GFCM/41/2017/7 on a regional plan of action to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the GFCM area of application;

CONSIDERING that certain fisheries management measures need to be revised and adapted to the evolution of both the status of exploited stocks and scientific knowledge, taking into account socio-economic aspects, and that an appropriate method shall be established to this end;

ACKNOWLEDGING the principles and international standards of responsible fishing practices enshrined in the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries;

RECALLING that the signatories of the 2017 Malta MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration urged all riparian States to comply with the management measures adopted by the GFCM and to fully implement the GFCM mid-term strategy (2017–2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries;

NOTING that Resolution GFCM/40/2016/2 for a mid-term strategy (2017–2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries includes a specific target on reversing the declining trend of fish stocks through strengthened scientific advice in support of management;

BEARING IN MIND that Resolution GFCM/40/2016/2 lists European eel as a priority commercial species of conservation concern for which an advice should be produced for the Mediterranean Sea;

WELCOMING management efforts made by certain contracting parties and cooperating non-contracting parties (CPCs) to support sustainable exploitation of European eel in their marine waters, freshwaters and in their transitional brackish waters such as lagoons and estuaries;

RECOGNIZING that urgent action is needed to ensure the recovery of the stock across its range of natural distribution and that measures need to apply during all stages of European eel life cycle, from the glass eel to the silver eel stage;

BEARING IN MIND that the particular migration and life cycle patterns displayed by catadromous fish require specific management and conservation measures;

NOTING that the SAC recommended, at its nineteenth session, that a Mediterranean adaptive regional management plan for this species shall be developed;

CONSIDERING that the population of European eel is considered a single stock so that the provisions included in this recommendation shall contribute to the recovery of the species;

CONSIDERING that the specific life cycle traits of catadromous species such as European eel call for specific management measures;

ADOPTS, in conformity with Articles 5 b), 8 b) and 13 of the GFCM Agreement, the following recommendation:

PART I

General objectives, geographical scope and definitions

General objectives of the multiannual plan

1. This recommendation establishes a multiannual management plan for the fisheries catching European eel in the Mediterranean Sea, in line with the precautionary approach to fisheries management. It shall be designed to provide and maintain high long-term yields and to guarantee a low risk of stock collapse while maintaining sustainable and relatively stable fisheries.

2. CPCs in the territory of which fishing activities catch European eel in the area referred to in paragraph 1 agree to implement such multiannual management plan for the fisheries concerned, in accordance with the general and specific objectives and measures set by this recommendation.
3. With due regard to the critical state of the European eel stock as reported by the SAC and to the ensuing urgency to restore the conservation state of this stock, CPCs agree that all activities catching European eel shall be covered by this plan, namely targeted, incidental and recreational catches.
4. A set of transitional precautionary management measures shall be developed in order to address the immediate need to decrease fishing mortality and to ensure that the stock is kept at biologically sustainable levels in the long term.
5. CPCs may take into account in their management measures other anthropogenic mortality factors, in order to reduce their impact on European eel and increase the likelihood that individuals escape to the sea, as well as include restocking or translocation practices.
6. Upon adequate data collection, the SAC shall formulate advice on long-term measures in accordance with the objectives set out in paragraph 1.
7. On the basis of SAC advice, the GFCM shall adapt and complement as appropriate the transitional precautionary management measures in order to meet the objectives set out in paragraph 1.
8. The multiannual management plan shall be applied in a fair, timely, transparent and non-discriminatory manner, consistent with international law and without prejudice to stricter or broader-encompassing measures that may already be established by CPCs in their national management plans.

Geographical scope

9. The multiannual management plan established by this recommendation shall apply to all marine waters of the Mediterranean Sea.
10. Taking into account the specificities of the life cycle of European eel, and the importance to include the management measures foreseen in all the habitats where fishing activities occur, CPCs agree to include freshwaters and transitional brackish waters, such as lagoons and estuaries, within the scope of this recommendation.

Definitions

11. For the purpose of this recommendation, the following definitions shall apply:
 - a) “European eel” means fish pertaining to the *Anguilla anguilla* species;
 - b) “Mediterranean Sea” means geographical subareas (GSAs) 1 to 27 included, as defined in Resolution GFCM/33/2009/2 on the establishment of geographical subareas in the GFCM area of application, amending Resolution GFCM/31/2007/2;
 - c) “recreational fishing” means a non-commercial fishing activity exploiting marine living resources for recreation, tourism or sport;

- d) “illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing” or “IUU fishing” means the activities set out in paragraph 3 of the 2001 FAO International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing;
- e) “authorized landing point” means ports, or places close to the shore and designated by the CPCs where landing of European eel catches is authorized;
- f) “fishing authorization” means a special authorization granted by legal authorities and entitling a natural or legal person or fishing vessel to engage in commercial fishing activities catching European eel, whether these catches are targeted during a specified period or in a given area;
- g) “closure period” means a specific period of the day or the year when fishing activities resulting in landings of European eel are prohibited;
- h) “DCRF manual” means the manual prepared by the SAC and endorsed by the Commission at its thirty-ninth session, resulting from the implementation of the DCRF.

PART II

Specific objectives

12. This recommendation establishes a multiannual management plan for European eel. The operational objective of this management plan is to contribute to controlling the fishing mortality and ensuring the long-term conservation and long-term sustainable use of this species in the Mediterranean Sea, in accordance with Article 2 of the GFCM Agreement and paragraph 1 of this plan.

13. The objective of the transitional precautionary management measures is to immediately adjust fishing mortality levels together with other possible measures and to address the critical state of the stock, as mentioned in Part III of this recommendation.

14. The transitional management measures shall also prepare the ground for a future management plan while reducing the risk that, in the absence of scientific assessment, the stock biomass will drop to extremely low levels, jeopardizing the economic viability of the fisheries exploiting European eel.

15. The plan shall ensure that relevant data concerning European eel and the fisheries exploiting it are collected through the DCRF online platform and in accordance with relevant GFCM decisions, and that scientific research is conducted in order to, *inter alia*, identify long-term management measures.

16. The plan shall ensure that, upon the timely provision of scientific advice by the SAC, the GFCM reviews and adapts the short-term management measures, if appropriate.

17. The plan shall finally pursue the reduction of IUU fishing activities in its area of application.

PART III

Transitional management measures

Transitional management measures

18. In the short term, CPCs shall implement a reduction of the fishing effort or catches of European eel of at least 30 percent compared to the reference period 2006–2008 or to another three-year reference period defined by CPCs. This reduction shall apply on a progressive basis of an annual 10 percent reduction over a period of three years starting from 1 January 2019, i.e. the year following the forty-second session of the

GFCM. The reference period shall be without prejudice to the discussions in the context of the working group referred to under paragraph 33 of this recommendation and shall not prejudice from the definition of a future reference period. Where national management plans resulting in effort or catch reductions of at least 30 percent have been implemented before the entry into force of this recommendation, the reference period may be the one designated in the national management plan.

19. CPCs shall establish an annual fishing closure of three consecutive months where landing European eel shall be prohibited. In order to decrease fishing mortality effectively, the closure period shall be defined by the CPCs in their national management plan, together with its fisheries and the gear targeting European eel. The fishing closure period shall be consistent with the objective defined in paragraph 18, with national management plans in place and with the temporal migration patterns of European eel in the CPC concerned.

20. CPCs may establish fisheries restricted areas (FRAs) within the geographical scope of this recommendation to further protect European eel. It shall be prohibited to land catches of European eel made in the FRAs, and specimens accidentally captured shall be immediately released upon their catch. The location and boundaries of the FRAs shall be consistent with the provisions set out in paragraph 18 and with the distribution of the main habitats of European eel in the CPC concerned.

National management plans and national management measures

21. National management plans and national management measures already in force in the territories under the jurisdiction of CPCs shall be communicated to the GFCM Secretariat by 31 January 2019 at the latest.

22. CPCs which do not have national measures in force shall adopt by 30 June 2019 a minimum set of measures consistent with paragraphs 18 to 20, and shall communicate them to the GFCM Secretariat by 31 January 2020 at the latest.

23. The national management plans adopted by CPCs shall establish technical measures, such as authorized fishing gear and mesh size.

24. CPCs may adopt voluntary measures to complement the multiannual management plan. These voluntary measures may take into account *inter alia* the conservation state of European eel in their waters, the impact of fishing activities catching European eel in their waters and relevant context specific to the relevant CPC, such as other anthropogenic mortality sources.

25. These measures shall be communicated to the GFCM Secretariat within one month of their entry into force.

PART IV

Data collection, scientific research programme and review clause

Data collection

26. Data provided by CPCs and referred to in the DCRF manual, including past data as far back as possible and the areas where European eel is known or likely to occur in their respective waters under the scope of this recommendation, shall be transmitted to the GFCM Secretariat not later than the forty-third session of the CGPM. The areas where European eel is known or likely to occur shall be defined, where possible, by closed polygons, where the summits coordinates are reported using the World Geodetic System 1984 spatial coordinate system. CPCs are encouraged to provide maps illustrating these areas, using the same spatial coordinate system.

27. Where recreational and/or IUU fishing are known to occur, data available, including estimates, shall also be transmitted to the GFCM Secretariat no later than the forty-third session of the GFCM.

28. CPCs shall transmit to the GFCM Secretariat data pertaining to restocking activities as well as data pertaining to fattening activities in accordance with the deadlines set in Recommendation GFCM/35/2011/6 on reporting of aquaculture data and information, amending Recommendation GFCM/33/2009/4.

29. CPCs may also transmit to the GFCM Secretariat any additional information on a voluntary basis, if possible no later than the forty-third session of the GFCM.

Scientific research programme

30. The GFCM Secretariat, with the support of the SAC, shall provide terms of reference, including costs, services and other requirements to support the implementation of a research programme on European eel in the Mediterranean Sea, in line with the one described in Appendix 7 of the report of the nineteenth session of the SAC. The research programme shall be launched in 2019 and completed in 2021, at the latest 6 months before the forty-fifth session of the GFCM.

Review clause

31. The multiannual management plan shall be assessed by the SAC and, if necessary, reviewed by the GFCM at its forty-fifth session.

PART V

Working group, assessment by the SAC and adoption of measures to achieve the long-term objectives

32. CPCs shall report on the implementation of the multiannual management plan to the GFCM in 2021, no later than the forty-fifth session of the Commission. If national measures were implemented, their assessment should be included in this report. If possible, CPCs are encouraged to provide an estimate of the impacts of the multiannual management plan and of their voluntary measures.

Working group

33. A working group shall be established to examine management measures for European eel. The tasks of the working group are defined in the annex to this recommendation.

Assessment by the SAC

34. In 2023, not later than six months before the forty-seventh session of the GFCM, the SAC shall advise on appropriate measures to achieve the long-term objectives set out in paragraph 1. To this effect, the SAC shall formulate an advice taking into account the reports of the CPCs, the result of the scientific research programme, the output of the working group, the data collected in the DCRF framework and the characteristics of the European eel conservation status and of the fisheries in the territories of the CPCs. The SAC, while duly taking into account the specificities of the European eel fisheries of CPCs, shall advise, *inter alia*, on the effectiveness of the management measures referred to in Part III, as well as on suitable catch limits or effort measures, on the minimum sizes, on appropriate technical measures, such as mesh and hook sizes and on other possible measures resulting in selectivity improvements.

Adoption of measures to achieve the long-term objectives

35. In 2023, at the forty-seventh session of the GFCM, CPCs shall adopt long-term management measures to achieve the objectives set out in paragraph 1, complementing or replacing the measures referred to in Part III.

PART VI

Fishing authorizations, landings and measures to fight IUU fishing: catch registration, traceability and control

Fishing authorizations

36. The authorization to land catches of European eel shall be conditioned to the granting of a fishing authorization, in accordance with the national management plans in place. Fishing authorizations shall be subject to the provisions set out in Part III and the CPCs shall maintain an updated register.

37. By 1 January 2020, each CPC shall establish a list of all fishing vessels flying its flag and authorized to fish for European eel in their respective waters under the scope of this recommendation, irrespective of the length overall of the vessel.

38. By 1 January 2020, each CPC shall establish a list of all authorized transitional and brackish waters, such as lagoons and estuaries, where traditional permanent fish-harvesting static gear used to catch European eel are in place.

39. Authorizations referred to in paragraphs 36 to 38 shall be transmitted to the GFCM Secretariat by 30 June 2020 and updated regularly.

Landings

40. Landings of European eel shall only be authorized in landing points designated for this purpose. CPCs shall communicate the list of such landing points to the GFCM Secretariat not later than the forty-third session of the GFCM.

41. By way of derogation from paragraph 40, CPCs may put in place measures alternative to designated landing points, provided that they effectively contribute to the fight against IUU fishing.

Measures to fight IUU fishing: catch registration, control and traceability

42. CPCs shall ensure that the fishers or masters of the vessels authorized to harvest European eel have the obligation to record their catches in live weight.

43. CPCs shall ensure that, in the special case of transitional and brackish waters such as lagoons and estuaries where European eel catching continues to be carried out with permanent traditional fish-harvesting static gear, authorized operators have the obligation to record their catches in live weight.

44. Without prejudice to paragraph 2 of Recommendation GFCM/35/2011/1 concerning the establishment of a GFCM logbook, amending Recommendation GFCM/34/2010/1, each CPC shall put in place a mechanism to record in the logbook its daily catches of European eel, irrespective of the live weight of the harvest.

45. CPCs shall set up a traceability system for landings, sales and exports allowing the catches to be traced from the authorized landing point to the final destination, whether the specimen are sold alive, dead or transformed.

46. By 1 January 2020, each CPC shall establish a list of auction halls, bodies or persons authorized by this CPC to undertake the first marketing of European eel.

Recreational fishing of European eel

47. CPCs shall establish on a regular basis an estimate of the number of recreational fishers and their catches of glass, yellow and silver eels.

PART VII Final provisions

Entry into force

48. National measures or measures referred to in Part III shall not derogate to or weaken the provisions agreed by CPCs under this multiannual management plan but complement them with a view to increasing the recovery rate of the stock of European eel.

49. The multiannual management plan does not prevent CPCs from adopting more stringent national measures.

50. Developing countries intending to develop their European eel fishery shall present a development plan including a management plan based on this recommendation which shall be assessed by the SAC not later than 30 June 2020. If the development plans are not in line with the general and specific objectives set out in this multiannual management plan, the SAC shall formulate recommendations, taking into account the specificities of the developing country in question.

Terms of reference for the working group on European eel

The working group referred to in paragraph 33 shall:

- 1) be supported by the GFCM;
- 2) establish a working plan for the development of its work and hold at least one meeting during 2019, before the next meeting of the SAC;
- 3) invite observers attending GFCM meetings, the FAO, and other regional fisheries management organizations to participate in its meetings; and
- 4) report its conclusions and opinions to the SAC.

Based on the information collected under Parts III and IV of this recommendation, the working group shall advise the SAC, at the latest in 2022, on appropriate management measures to achieve the objectives referred to in paragraph 1 of this recommendation. While duly taking into account the specificities of the European eel fisheries of the CPCs, it shall advise, *inter alia*, the SAC on the effectiveness of the management and technical measures referred to in Part III, on suitable catch limits, fishing effort, minimum sizes, mesh and hooks sizes and on other possible measures resulting in selectivity improvements.