

17 October 2023

Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius
European Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Sent by email to: cab-sinkevicius-contact@ec.europa.eu

Re: Meeting the EU's obligation to close deep-sea vulnerable marine ecosystems to destructive fishing.

Dear Commissioner Sinkevičius,

We, the underlisted organisations, jointly call on the European Commission under your leadership to steer and secure the successful adoption of new closures of the deep seabed to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems in EU waters on an expedited basis, in line with the best scientific advice, and would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you at your earliest convenience to exchange further on this important matter.

We were pleased to see the first step taken by you, along with Member States, to close VMEs in October 2022 to bottom fishing in the deep sea to protect biodiversity in EU waters under the EU Deep-Sea Access Regulation. We are deeply concerned, however, that further progress may be stalled, and the Regulation undermined, if the next round of closures is not adopted, in spite of the requirement to do so on an annual basis and the advice already provided by ICES to this end.

Protecting the deep sea is central to the EU's wider commitments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. When the Commission, under your leadership, implemented the first closures in October 2022 under the EU Deep-Sea Access Regulation, it was deemed a critical win for the protection, conservation and restoration of biodiversity and the marine environment in the EU's waters.

Deep-sea ecosystems are extremely vulnerable to the impact of bottom fishing and, as acknowledged in the EU Marine Action Plan, it is difficult to protect them against the impact of overfishing and destructive fishing practices. At risk are fragile environments associated with continental slope areas and seamounts, oceanic ridge systems and similar underwater features where cold-water corals, deep-sea sponges and other taxonomic groups provide a rich habitat for many other species. Many deep-sea species are long-lived, slow to grow and reproduce, and adapted to a largely unchanging environment. That makes them particularly vulnerable to destructive fishing gears, in particular deepwater bottom trawling.

The United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly committed States to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold-water corals, from destructive fishing practices "recognizing the immense importance and value of deep-sea ecosystems and the biodiversity they contain". Implementing this commitment in EU waters is established as an explicit

and fundamental objective in the EU Deep-Sea Access Regulation. When the regulation was adopted in 2016, with the prohibition on bottom trawling below 800 metres depth and the requirement to close areas between 400 - 800 metres depth to bottom fishing where vulnerable marine ecosystems are known or likely to occur, it was deemed a visionary step on a global scale.

It is imperative that the EU remains steadfast in its ambition to protect the deep sea and continues the process of implementing the Regulation. This is now particularly important as the second annual review of the list of current and proposed vulnerable marine ecosystems under the Deep-Sea Access Regulation is now underway.

All Member States, as well as the European Parliament, committed to be legally bound to implement the EU Deep-Sea Access Regulation when it was adopted by consensus in 2016. The spirit of this commitment was further demonstrated when EU Heads of States, as well as President Ursula von der Leyen, signed the Leaders Pledge for Nature to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

Your sustained efforts for a timely implementation of this protection mechanism for deep-sea vulnerable ecosystems represents an opportunity to demonstrate the EU's ongoing leadership, commitment, ambition and accountability toward biodiversity and marine conservation. As such, as you enter the final stretch of your mandate, we respectfully urge you to secure the continued protection of seamounts and other vulnerable marine ecosystems in EU waters, and steer the successful adoption of new closures, in line with the best, and most ambitious, scientific advice. Option E, as proposed by ICES, would best fulfill the spirit and letter of the Deep-Sea Regulation.

This is a rare opportunity to contribute to your legacy in protecting one of the most biologically vulnerable and biologically diverse areas of the planet. We look forward to meeting with you to further discuss this important matter.

Sincerely yours,



Matthew Gianni
Co-founder, Political and Policy Advisor, Deep Sea Conservation Coalition

On behalf of our membership including the following 16 partners:



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Danmarks
Naturfredningsforening 

**ecologistas
en acción** 

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geota 
grupo de estudos de ordenamento do
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