



NOT MUCH FISH ON THE FORK

Taking a closer look at the European Commission's Farm to Fork Strategy

By Chris Davies, former chair of the European Parliament's fisheries committee.

Who forgot the fish? If an object of the European Green Deal is to help the EU become climate neutral by 2050 then surely a source of protein that has such a low carbon footprint as fish deserved some star billing? After all, in a low-emission contest with a cow the fish will win every time. But in the Commission's Farm to Fork strategy the poor fish gets almost no special attention at all. It's very much an afterthought.

To be fair, this is in part because the folk at DG Mare in Brussels have got their act together in recent years and have already set in motion many of the changes needed, While the agriculture sector is in the Commission's line of sight, with pesticides and fertilisers apparently still being used in quantities that seem careless, the worst excesses of the fishing industry are already being brought under control.

Overfishing was the rule for too long, but away from the Mediterranean most fishing in EU

waters is now being carried out sustainably. Recent progress has been impressive but not without difficulty. The size of national fishing fleets has been reduced significantly, but in consequence the industry has now a secure long-term future and has of late been making record profits, or at least it was until the virus brought its disruption.


Fish to fork traceability is being improved, with the Commission currently attempting to secure support for all fishers to be required to provide catch certificates, making it possible to identify which fish came from which boat, and making life hard for both cheats and illegal fishers.

Yet given that Farm to Fork dwells on obesity rates, and suggests that a more plant-based diet of fruit and vegetables is needed with Europeans consuming less meat, it is strange that the strategy places no particular emphasis on good healthy low fat fish that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Increasing fish consumption gets no mention.



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Across the world the fastest growing form of food production has for some decades been aquaculture. People globally now eat more fish that is farmed than fish that is caught from the sea.



Yet the EU lags behind, producing only 1% of the total. You might think that in aquaculture there was a win-win growth opportunity to be explored, but it didn't happen in this communications.

Still, at least it does touch upon the biggest concern, that aquaculture may require too many fish to be caught unsustainably in the wild to feed the more profitable fish in the cages. Improvements are taking place, with farmed fish having a more veggie diet than used to be the case, and now the Commission promises to give support for development of algae alternatives in the fish meal, supplemented perhaps by a cocktail of insects.

A number of major retailers and food processing companies have taken a lead in demanding that their suppliers adopt sustainable methods. They deserve much praise and an enhanced reputation.

Sadly, sheltering behind them are many other companies that keep their heads down, put the food on the shelves, and say as little as possible about where it has come from or at what cost to the environment.

The Commission says it will seek commitments from food companies to take actions on health and sustainability, with the threat of legislative action if the recalcitrant ones don't step up to the plate. It should not be an empty threat. Retailers and the processing companies have immense power to bring about change for the better and must be made to deploy it.

Neither marine environmentalists nor the fisheries industry should get very worked up about the Farm to Fork strategy. But at its same meeting the College of Commissioners also adopted its 2030 Biodiversity Strategy. Now that is quite a different matter. Stormy waters may lie ahead.