

Advice

Upcoming EU Strategies for Coastal Communities and for Islands

Brussels, 24 April 2026

1. Background

The mission letters of Commission Executive Vice-President Fitto and Commissioner Kadis¹ set out the political commitment to ensure that coastal communities can seize growth opportunities, adapt to the impact of climate change and develop resilient, innovative blue economies. The European Ocean Pact² refers to the commitments to adopt strategies for coastal communities³ and for islands⁴, complementing the updated strategy for the Outermost Regions⁵.

The Strategy for Coastal Communities is expected to focus on three interlinked objectives: 1) enhancing resilience and adaptation, 2) strengthening economic competitiveness, and 3) fostering inclusive and vibrant communities by ensuring social cohesion. The Strategy for Islands is expected to focus on four key areas: 1) economic development, competitiveness and innovation, 2) green transition, climate resilience and environmental protection, 3) social cohesion, demography and quality of life, and 4) security and resilience. The strategies are expected to be published in June 2026.

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/about/commission-2024-2029/commissioners-designate-2024-2029_en

² [European Commission, Communication on “The European Ocean Pact” \(5 June 2025\)](https://ec.europa.eu/communication/2025/06/05/european-ocean-pact_en)

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/16853-EU-coastal-communities-strategy_en

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/16992-EU-strategy-for-islands_en

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/15713-Strategy-for-the-EUs-outermost-regions_en

The EU's coastal areas are home to around 90 million people. While coastal and island communities are geographically and socio-economically diverse, the fisheries and aquaculture supply chain is a key pillar of the EU's blue economy⁶, contributing significantly to food sovereignty, employment, economic development, and environmental sustainability. In 2021, the marine living resources sector (fisheries, aquaculture, processing and distribution of fish products) generated more than €22.0 billion in Gross Value Added. The sector directly employed more than 543 000 persons, mainly in coastal areas.

Furthermore, fisheries and aquaculture are deeply embedded in the traditions, cultural heritage, and identity of people living in coastal and islands regions across the European Union, as reflected in local festivals and folklore. These activities are also connected, as intangible cultural heritage, to the regional gastronomy of coastal areas⁷.

2. Objectives of the Strategies

a) Strengthening economic competitiveness

From a market perspective, strengthening economic competitiveness in coastal and island communities requires a full value chain approach, covering primary production, processing, and trade. The fisheries and aquaculture value chain is a cornerstone of the EU's blue economy, generating high-value products, contributing to food sovereignty, and creating stable and skilled jobs in coastal and island regions⁸.

As examples of relevance in the economy of coastal and island communities, in the case of the aquaculture sector, it is possible to highlight the productions of salmon in Ireland, seabass and seabream in Mediterranean islands, and mussels and oysters across Atlantic and North Sea

⁶ [European Commission, The EU blue economy report 2024](#)

⁷ [MAC Advice "Vision for Fisheries, Aquaculture and their Market in 2040" \(15 July 2025\)](#)

⁸ [MAC Advice "European Year of Skills" \(30 March 2023\)](#)

coasts. In the case of the processing sector, as an example, the Danish marine ingredients industry purchases raw materials worth approximately EUR 160.580.400 from both Danish and foreign fishing vessels, directly supporting local economies. The EU fleet, comprised of around 69.000 vessels⁹, directly employs 124.485 fishers, supplying 2.968 EU fishing ports¹⁰. The EU processing activities, a central industrial pillar of the EU blue economy, while strongly embedded in global supply chains, rely on a combination of domestic landings, aquaculture production, and external supplies, to ensure a continuity of supply, product diversification, and competitiveness.

As coastal waters accommodate a growing number of human activities, such as offshore renewable energy, maritime transport, military activities, and tourism, there is a growing pressure on maritime space. In the view of the MAC, the growing diversity of maritime uses requires continuous efforts to maintain a balanced approach between the three pillars of sustainability: environmental protection, economic profitability, and social wellbeing. Decisions taken at sea shape coastal and island communities, whose livelihoods, culture and development depend on marine ecosystems.

The EU fisheries and aquaculture economy is inherently dual in nature: locally embedded in coastal and island production systems, while simultaneously integrated in international supply chains, including for species not sufficiently available from EU production. The described interdependence is essential for maintaining the viability and competitiveness of the EU fisheries and aquaculture value chain, including through the stable and predictable access to sustainable raw materials by the EU processing industry.

Trade patterns, including the EU's self-sufficiency rate on fishery and aquaculture products¹¹, illustrate the strategic importance of sustaining and strengthening domestic production and

⁹ [European Commission, 2025, Facts and figures on the common fisheries policy](#)

¹⁰ [EUMOFA, 2025, Country profile – European Union](#)

¹¹ [EUMOFA, The EU Fish Market \(2025\)](#)

processing capacity, while also acknowledging the role of diversified sourcing. A competitive coastal and island economy depends on ensuring access to raw materials and functioning domestic and international fisheries and aquaculture supply chains, including through the recognition of the role of both upstream and downstream operators, to enable value creation in the EU. In the view of the MAC, to strengthen market competitiveness, the strategies should promote targeted support for market diversification schemes, investments, innovation, automation, and digitalisation, particularly through the use of climate-neutral technologies, across the entire value chain. The strategies should also enhance the resilience of fisheries and aquaculture supply chains in light of geopolitical and market volatility.

b) Enhancing resilience and adaptation

Enhancing resilience and adaptation in coastal and island communities requires recognising the role of resource-efficient and low-impact production across the fisheries and aquaculture value chain. In terms of environmental characteristics, in comparison with other protein sources, fishery and aquaculture products generally have a lower carbon footprint, require little terrestrial surface and freshwater, and benefit from the biological efficiency of aquatic animals¹².

The fisheries and aquaculture value chain contribute to a circular and resource-efficient economy. As an example, up to 40% of the EU production of fishmeal and fish oil is based on by-products and trimmings from fish processing, reducing waste, maximising the use of marine resources, and lowering the overall environmental footprint of the value chain.

According to the FAO¹³, on the worldwide scale, meeting the demand for greater availability of aquatic animal foods necessitates higher production. From a global perspective, and as the world population is expected to reach 9 billion people in 2037 (and continue growing for another fifty

¹² [MAC Advice “Health and Environmental Value of Seafood” \(8 October 2021\)](#)

¹³ [FAO, The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024](#)

years and reach a peak of more than 10 billion people in the mid-2080s), the EU has a responsibility to participate in increasing protein production in the least carbon-intensive way possible. According to the FAO's Blue Transformation¹⁴ call, we must “build more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient and more sustainable aquatic food systems to increase their contribution to global food security, meet nutrition requirements and improve livelihoods of a growing population”. Depending on the region, the required increase in supply may be sourced from increased domestic production and supplemented by imports. While, worldwide, the aquaculture sector has reached record production levels, the EU aquaculture sector has stagnated since 2020 and, in some segments, such as shellfish production, significantly declined their production volume¹⁵.

According to the latest Commission Communication¹⁶, the EU fishing fleet shrank by roughly 3% in vessel numbers, 5% in gross tonnage, and 3% in engine power during 2024. As of 1 January 2025, the fleet comprised 69,570 vessels. In comparison, the fleet numbered 83,734 vessels in 2013¹⁷, a decline of about 17 % over twelve years. Moreover, compared with the 96,000 vessels in 2000¹⁸, this marks a 28 % reduction. This ongoing alarming downward trend is a significant concern for the maritime socio-economic sustainability of coastal and island communities¹⁹. Even more when the average age of the EU fleet is over 31 years.

¹⁴ [FAO, Blue Transformation - Roadmap 2022–2030](#)

¹⁵ [STECF, The 2024 Aquaculture Economic Report](#)

¹⁶ [European Commission, Communication “Sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2026” \(6 June 2025\)](#)

¹⁷ [STECF, The 2015 annual economic report on the EU fishing fleet](#)

¹⁸ [FAO, The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2002](#)

¹⁹ In the view of Oceana, the characterisation of the long-term reduction of the EU fishing fleet as an “alarming” trend for the socio-economic sustainability of coastal and island communities does not reconcile with the policy’s rationale and the evidence made available by the Commission. As outlined in the Commission’s 2009 Green Paper on the Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, the EU policy purportedly pursued a proportionate fleet capacity, including through fleet reduction, in relation to available fish stocks. In accordance with the 2023 Commission Staff Working Document on the state of play of the EU fishing fleet, fleets targeting stocks fished sustainably for several years tend to record higher profitability and salaries.

The fisheries and aquaculture value chain contributes to lower climate impact, reduced waste and improved resource utilisation, greater resilience of aquatic food systems, and adaptation of environmental and market-related pressures. Therefore, in the view of the MAC, strengthening fisheries and aquaculture production models within the EU coastal and islands communities can support both climate objectives and long-term resilience, while ensuring that marine resources are used in the most efficient and sustainable way.

c) Fostering inclusive and vibrant communities

In many peripheral coastal and island communities, the fisheries and aquaculture value chain is a lifeline for youth employment and intergenerational continuity, offering year-round, land-based and sea-based jobs that help stabilise local populations and support social cohesion. These jobs span a wide range of skills, including technical and logistical functions, thereby contributing to a diverse and resilient labour market.

Coastal and island communities are part of integrated economic systems, where fisheries, aquaculture, processing, retail, and related industries are interdependent. Furthermore, the fisheries and aquaculture value chain supports a broad network of related industries, including transport, port services, equipment maintenance, energy supply, and quality controls. These related sectors are often geographically concentrated around processing facilities and are critical to sustaining local coastal and island economic ecosystems. Therefore, the preservation of the fisheries and aquaculture value chain is a prerequisite for sustaining vibrant coastal and island communities, while also preserving local identity and heritage linked to marine activities.

In the view of the MAC, to foster inclusive and vibrant communities, the upcoming strategies should support generational renewal, vocational training and upskilling, cultural heritage initiatives linking fisheries and aquaculture to local gastronomy and festivals, thereby contributing to social cohesion and gender balance in remote areas.

3. Likely impacts

a) Coherent approach to EU sectoral policies, initiatives and funding instruments

A coherent approach to EU policies should reflect the reality that coastal and island communities are built around integrated fisheries and aquaculture value chains, where different sectors are closely interconnected. It is important to keep in mind that decisions taken upstream, such as on stock management and access to raw materials, affect production volumes, market access and price formation, while downstream demand shapes market dynamics and investment decisions.

At present, EU policies and funding instruments do not always fully reflect the abovementioned interdependencies, contributing to fragmentation where upstream, midstream, and downstream economic activities are addressed separately. In the view of the MAC, a more coherent approach would enable a stronger and more stable fisheries and aquaculture value chain, essential for employment, local industries, and retaining value in coastal and island communities.

b) Empowerment of coastal and island communities

Empowering coastal and island communities requires recognising their role not only as sites of production, but as strategic contributions to EU food security in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical context.

Fishery and aquaculture products are an important source of several important nutrients²⁰. The consumption of fishery and aquaculture products can potentially reduce micronutrient deficiencies and might further reduce the risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases.

²⁰ [FAO & WHO. 2024. FAO/WHO background document on the risks and benefits of fish consumption. Food Safety and Quality Series, No. 27. Rome](#)

Aquatic foods are an excellent source of protein and even more important source of other nutrients, being considered among the healthiest foods²¹.

In the view of the MAC, as global demand for aquatic food continues to increase, the upcoming EU strategies can strengthen domestic production and processing capacity within the EU, reducing dependency on external inputs and enhancing supply security, while supporting economic activity in coastal and island communities.

4. Recommendations

The MAC considers that, in the context of the upcoming EU Strategy for Coastal Communities and of the upcoming EU Strategy for Islands, the European Commission should:

- a) Acknowledge and support the fisheries and aquaculture value chain as a key pillar of coastal and island economies that contributes significantly to food sovereignty, employment, economic development, and environmental sustainability;
- b) Promote a full value chain approach, which includes fishers, aquaculture farmers, auctions, processors, traders, retailers and other stakeholders, recognising their economic and operational interdependency, taking into account both domestic and international supply chains;
- c) Strengthen sustainable domestic production and processing capacity of fishery and aquaculture products within the EU, while also acknowledging the role of diversified raw materials to ensure supply security, industrial continuity, and value creation in coastal and island communities – this should be underpinned through dedicated funding to enhance resilience, innovation, and logistics infrastructure across the entire value chain;

²¹ [FAO, The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024](#)

- d) Emphasise the environmental and nutritional benefits of fishery and aquaculture products, including their generally lower carbon footprint and their important role as a source of protein and other nutrients, as well as the relevance of by-product utilisation and of circular economies;
- e) Strengthen the supply and consumption of sustainable fishery and aquaculture products, including through dedicated financial resources for effective communication on the health, environmental, and economic benefits;
- f) Support generational renewal, vocational training and upskilling linked to the fisheries and aquaculture value chain, including through budget lines for the blue economy under the next European Social Fund, as well as cultural heritage initiatives linking fisheries and aquaculture to local cultural initiatives;
- g) Highlight and preserve the role of the fisheries and aquaculture value chain in the traditions, cultural heritage, including gastronomy, and identity of people living in coastal and island communities;
- h) Under the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework, ensure an adequate and dedicated fund for the fisheries and aquaculture value chain, at least maintaining the allocation under the existing framework, to ensure a sustainable, competitive, and resilient value chain, while also safeguarding a level-playing-field across the EU, as the sector is mainly composed of SMEs;
- i) Ensure that decision-making in coastal and island communities involves meaningful participation of local communities, including fisheries and aquaculture stakeholders
- j) Recognise the fisheries and aquaculture value chain as a strategic industrial activity within the blue economy, characterised by high employment intensity, strong regional anchoring in coastal and island communities, and integration to international supply chains, while ensuring that future policy and funding instruments reflect the role of the various actors



of the value chain, including the role of the EU processing industry as the interface between EU production and international markets.

The majority of the membership of the MAC considers that the Commission should also:

- a) In the context of the competitiveness and economic sustainability of the fisheries and aquaculture value²², take into account the Commission's targets to simplify legislation and reduce administrative burden by at least 25% for businesses and 35% for SMEs²³;

²² [MAC Advice "Competitiveness of the EU Market of Fishery and Aquaculture Products – Simplification and reduction of administrative burden" \(26 March 2026\)](#)

²³ In the view of Oceana, the existing EU legal framework (e.g., Common Fisheries Policy Regulation, IUU Regulation, and Fisheries Control Regulation) was designed through consultations and consensus. Therefore, the aim should be a steadfast implementation of the legal framework, particularly in the pursuit of economic sustainability, instead of attempts to rewrite or simplify legislation.