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EU Commissioner addresses important international fishing conference on control and compliance

The European Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs today (Thursday) told fishing industry representatives that he hopes for their support in developing new, more effective rules on control and compliance.

Commissioner Dr Joe Borg was speaking at an important conference on control and compliance in the fishing industry in Peterhead, Aberdeenshire.

It is being hosted by the North Sea Regional Advisory Council (NSRAC) in cooperation with the Scottish Government and the Community Fisheries Control Agency (CFCA).

Assistant Director General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Ichiro Nomura and European Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Joe Borg both attended the conference.

Commissioner Borg gave the Keynote Speech on the first day of the conference, taking place at Peterhead's Palace Hotel on today and tomorrow. (February 21 and 22)

In his speech, Dr Borg emphasised the findings of a Court of Auditors report on control inspections and sanctions which found catch data to be unreliable, and systems for following up infringements and imposing sanctions to be often inappropriate.

He admitted it had a damning conclusion, pointing to ineffective control systems and told of research of his which had similar findings.

He said member states are sending data to the Commission which does not add up, showing a lack of verification at source, with the help of cross checks.

"The message remains the same – namely that our control system is simply not delivering," he told the conference.

"If we don't act, we will continue the vicious circle of false catch declarations fed into the scientific assessment, which leads to poor advice.

"This leads to low respect for the rules and unsustainable additional pressure on stocks.

"If we don't act now all our work to bring fishing back to sustainable levels will be seriously undermined."

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He spoke of the need to develop a new approach towards inspection and control which is simplified, harmonised, cost effective, and that ensures controllability as well as developing a culture of compliance.

Dr Borg also spoke of the need to introduce deterrent sanctions; reinforcing the capacity of the Commission, including the ability to close fisheries on its own initiative; as well as strengthening cooperation and assistance in the industry.

Suspending community aid or introducing incentives would also be options as a means of taking action against those in breach of the regulations, he said.

He described the current situation as a “vastly unlevel playing field”. Moreover, he emphasised the role which modern technology could play in verifying information.

The Commissioner also said he was looking at broadening the mandate of the Control Agency to play a role between member states and the Commission.

“Control measures need to be simpler and need to take better account of the views of stakeholders,” he added.

“The object is not getting more money from fishermen. The object is that penalties must be comparable across the EU, and that they should work as a deterrent.

“The current system is one that almost invites cheating. Reform must have the interests of hard-working and honest fishermen at heart.”

Closing his speech he urged immediate action and said he will launch a task force on control policy, as well as consulting control experts in member states.

“It is clear that there is a job to do. I am counting on your action, involvement and your support as stakeholders,” he told the conference.

The conference includes workshops on realtime closures, technical conservation and influencing behaviour, as well as a presentation on the European Parliament’s opinion by Ian Hudghton MEP.

The NSRAC is the formal channel for stakeholders to provide suggestions and advice to the EC and the Council of Ministers on fishing in the North Sea.

The Regional Advisory Councils, of which six are operational, are a key element of the 2002 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

They aim for better engagement of the people the policy affects and for more regionally-focused fisheries management.

Aberdeenshire Council provides the secretariat for the NSRAC, which hosted its Executive Committee Meeting in the town’s Arbuthnot House on Wednesday.

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A drinks reception for delegates was held afterwards on board the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency vessel FPV Jura, berthed at Peterhead Harbour, attended by Aberdeenshire Provost Bill Howatson and Aberdeenshire Council Chief Executive Alan Campbell.

The local authority's European Fishing Projects Coordinator and NSRAC executive secretary, Ann Bell, said: "Everybody we have spoken to has been impressed by Aberdeenshire's support and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive about how much commitment Aberdeenshire Council has made to the NSRAC, and therefore the fishing industry.

"The visit to the fisheries protection vessel also went down very well and was a fitting way to start the conference."

The aim of the conference is to try to develop a culture and a language of compliance and involve the fishing industry in the development of any new regulations.

Provost of Aberdeenshire, Bill Howatson, who had dinner with Commissioner Borg on Wednesday night, said: "It flows on, given the importance of the north-east economy, that we are in a position to provide a common forum where there can be a robust exchange of views.

"The council has a particular role as a facilitator and we have taken this opportunity to welcome the Commissioner, with whom we had very fruitful discussions.

"We are pleased that the Commissioner was able to attend and to make full use of the facilities we can offer, in terms of promoting the fishing industry."

-ENDS-

Notes to editors:

Countries involved in the NSRAC are: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

These stakeholder-led forums give fishermen and other interested parties, including environmental organisations and consumer groups, a say in the way the CFP operates. They are the formal channel through which stakeholders can give suggestions and advice to the European Commission and the Council of Ministers.

Various picture and interview opportunities will be made available, for the remainder of the conference and photographs from the conference are also available from the Communications Unit at Aberdeenshire Council. Contact a member of the team on the above number for further information.

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