FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN AQUACULTURE PRODUCERS

Position Paper

November 2024

On the need for coordinated European management actions of Great Cormorant in the EU

Background

The populations of some protected animal species have been steadily increasing in European rural inland and coastal landscapes for the last decades, well beyond historical recorded levels. This has been positive with respect to the protection of those species but is having collateral consequences creating intense losses on aquaculture farmed stocks and serious impoverishment on natural fish populations.

Although the changes of population size of the two subspecies (*Ph. carbo carbo; Ph. carbo sinensis*) and the different subpopulations of *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* are not uniform, there is a wide scientific consensus that the overall population size of this migratory bird species is steadily increasing and is currently the largest that has been recorded in the last century. Scientific evidence also proves that the breeding areas of the subpopulations are so far from feeding and wintering areas, that the location of source and effect are spatially distant from each other. Currently, the number of Cormorant breeding pairs exceeds 400,000, bringing the total close to 2 million individuals in Europe based on latest Europe wide monitoring by BirdLife International in 2015. This dramatic increase led to the change of the conservational status of the species to Least Concern by IUCN and the removal from the Annexes of the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) and only keep the species generally protected under the Article 1.

Although the scientific literature gives a wide range of daily fish consumption of the Great Cormorant there is also consensus that the average fish consumption is about 500 g/day. It means that the European population consumes at least 1,000 tons of fish daily. The great cormorants cause various direct and indirect losses to fish farms. Direct financial losses are the consumption of commercially raised fish and in the yield of juveniles by predation, while indirect financial losses are caused through stress, low welfare, lower weight gain on commercially farmed fish because of wounding, harming and lowering production efficiency. Another important indirect effect of cormorant predation is that it threatens the maintenance of the complex ecosystem services provided by extensive pond and lagoon aquaculture, as well as contribute to the biodiversity loss, which is created and maintained by the results of these production systems.

Beside the damages in fish farms, the booming population of cormorant is suspected to be a key driver behind the population loss of several endangered fish species in European natural waters such as eel and sterlet as well as other important species such as grayling and brown trout. Currently it causes an important issue to achieve the good ecological status of these surface waters by Water Framework Directive.

Beyond the above mentioned, several important facts must be highlighted concerning the predation of Great cormorant. (1) Without active interventions the cormorant is able to eradicate the entire

Avenue des Arts 56, 1000 Brussels (Belgium) | Tel. : +32 4 3382995 | secretariat@feap.info

fish stock from ponds or raceways making the compensation measures alone inappropriate for maintaining the aquaculture production in the EU. (2) The principle of natural population control doesn't work at Great Cormorants, since during critical periods (especially in winter), aquaculture production provides food for overbreeding population, so the population size is remaining consistently higher than the natural capacity. It also means that the current increasing population size of Great Cormorant is fuelled by aquaculture production. (3) This fact is exacerbated by climate change, since more and more areas are lacking ice-coverage during wintertime in Europe. (4) It also causes unjustified suffering and decreasing welfare for the fish stocks due to constant disturbance.

Over the last decades, several research results and policy recommendations have been made on the Great cormorant management in Europe. Scientific evidence indicates that only a Europe-wide management plan based on regional coordination can offer acceptable results in the different aspects of management, including conservational aspects: determining the carrying capacity, the appropriate management tools, and the monitoring activities, and administrative ones: determining the eligible measures, reducing the administrative burden, introducing a single, simple administrative procedure for applying the derogation tools. These results were promoted by FEAP[1,2,3] as well as the EP[4,5,6], however, the European Commission argues for the use of only local management tools, while its inadequateness is more striking than ever, considering the experiences of the last 20 years.

Proposals for action

- Aquaculture producers have an indisputable right to protect their own production on their privately owned and maintained fish farms, and they also have responsibility to maintain the welfare and health status of the fish they produce, protecting them from unjustified constant disturbance by cormorants.
- Maintaining the derogation by the Birds Directive is essential to sustain the EU aquaculture, even to protect the populations of threatened fish species, but also has to be declared that the current practices doesn't mean sufficient solution.
- For this reason, FEAP is repeatedly and strongly urging the development of an operative European Great Cormorant Management Plan to reevaluate the carrying capacity of the different habitat types and regions and to determine the eligible measures as well as implementation of cormorant control measures and tools on spatial and time scale.

[1] FEAP Resolution (2017) Resolution on the great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* to be a huntable species.
[2] FEAP Press release (2018) More cooperation is needed to improve cormorant management in Europe.
[3] FEAP Factsheet (2022) Impact of wildlife ont he aquaculture production.
[4] EP Resolution (2008) adoption of a European Cormorant Management Plan to minimise the increasing impact of cormorants on fish stocks, fishing and aquaculture, (2008/2177(INI)).
[5] EP Resolution (2018) Towards a sustainable and competitive European aquaculture sector, (2017/2118(INI)).
[6] EP Resolution (2023) Striving for a sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture: the way forward, (2021/2189(INI)).

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- However, beside the long-term solution, fish farmers need an immediate action developing a guidance document on how to apply derogations provided for in Article 9 of the Birds Directive, altogether with reducing the administrative burden and introducing a single, simple administrative procedure for applying the derogation tools.
- The cost of the control mechanisms should be financed through environmental protection and EU Rural development funds through national budgets in all concerned EU Member states. Compensation for the damages on fish stocks and farming structures, especially on man-made facilities, should be financed through the financial mechanisms designated for the protection and restoration of the environment according to the rule that whoever protects then pays.
- Increase support to scientific and technical research and innovation on the improvement of effective protection measures, new technologies for automatic monitoring and early damage prevention. An overview of international experiences on efficient wild species control should be carried out. Practices on derogation systems, regulation mechanisms and compensation schemes should be shared between EU Member states.

FEAP, November 2024

The Federation of European Aquaculture Producers is an organisation that represents the European fish farming profession and is based in Brussels. FEAP is composed of 24 national fish farming associations from 23 countries, both EU and non-EU. The combined yearly production of FEAP members surpasses 2,5 million tonnes of nutritious, safe, delicious and environmentally sustainable fish.

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