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Eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products

European Parliament resolution on launching a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products (2005/2189(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee launching a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products (COM(2005)0275),
 - having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee,
 - having regard to Report No 780 of the 26th session of the Committee on Fisheries of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) held in Rome from 7 to 11 March 2005,
 - having regard to the communication from the Commission setting out a Community Action Plan to integrate environmental protection requirements into the Common Fisheries Policy (COM(2002)0186),
 - having regard to the communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on 'The future for the market in fisheries products in the European Union: responsibility, partnership and competitiveness' (COM(1997)0719),
 - having regard to Council Regulation (EC) No 2371/2002 of 20 December 2002 on the conservation and sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources under the Common Fisheries Policy⁽¹⁾,
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Fisheries and the opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (A6-0219/2006),
- A. whereas the placing on the market of fishery products, substantiated by reliable certification that their capture, breeding, harvesting or processing are in accordance with environmental sustainability criteria, may contribute significantly to an increase in support from both producers and consumers for the objectives behind sustainable fishing,
- B. whereas, however, there is no single internationally adopted criterion regarding the meaning of sustainability in relation to fishery products,
- C. whereas an ecological approach as part of an eco-labelling scheme must always be based on broad-spectrum assessments,
- D. whereas an eco-labelling and certification scheme must give preference to a multi-criteria clarification system,
- E. whereas the FAO has been considering the issue of eco-labelling for fisheries and aquaculture products since 1998, with its Committee on Fisheries issuing directives on the subject in May 2005,
- F. whereas the World Trade Organization (WTO) looked into the matter following the meeting in Doha in 2001, at which it became clear that developing countries were concerned that an eco-labelling scheme could lead to a new protectionist mechanism for products from more developed countries,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 358, 31.12.2002, p. 59.

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- G. whereas eco-labelling for fisheries products may serve to improve the gathering of information on specific fisheries (improvements to the quantity and reliability of data),
- H. whereas the numerous eco-labelling schemes and criteria relating to eco-labelling that are emerging, together with the lack of confidence and sense of confusion that this generates among consumers, may lead to the discrediting of this mechanism,
- I. whereas the European Community recently signed the Agreement on the International Dolphin Conservation Program and the associated eco-certification scheme (Dolphin Safe),
- J. whereas it has also been shown that there is confusion regarding the difference between an ecological label and a quality label,
- K. whereas, in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 2371/2002, all European Union fisheries should, by definition, be sustainable, since they should conform to Community standards,
1. Welcomes the communication from the Commission launching a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labelling schemes for fisheries products;
 2. Regrets, however, the delays on the part of the Commission in coming forward with its communication, which have in the meantime allowed privately initiated eco-labels to proliferate without any form of public control, giving rise to issues of credibility and confusion for producers and consumers;
 3. Draws attention, furthermore, to the real objectives of many of these labels which, given the growing importance that consumers place on sustainable development, are simply used as a means to increase sales, denying the consumer any real guarantee that the products actually contribute to sustainability;
 4. Believes that the range of schemes currently in place adds to the complexity of the issue and that any future proposal must not be designed in such a way that those already operating in the market are given a commercial advantage;
 5. Understands that the sole purpose of the communication is to launch a general debate and not at this stage to consider the details of the criteria on which Community eco-labelling is to be based; regrets, however, that the Commission's communication brings little to the debate which the Commission itself is seeking to initiate, and which now appears to have been left wide open, with little thought being given to it;
 6. Deplores the communication's lack of ambition and considers that the chosen option (which consists of establishing minimum requirements for voluntary eco-labelling schemes) does not fully address the issues in question; considers that whatever labels are used in the marketplace must be independently monitored in order to be absolutely reliable and credible for the consumer;
 7. Calls for better recognition at European level of non-industrial fishing; before the possible establishment of an eco-labelling scheme, calls for the parties concerned, including representatives of the non-industrial fishing sector, to be consulted and their suggestions taken into account;
 8. Believes that a label will be fully effective only if it is uniform and easily comprehensible to consumers, allowing them to choose products that maintain the sustainability of fisheries resources;
 9. Encourages the Commission consequently to develop further a broad debate in which all parties concerned can participate and in which serious thought can be given to the volume and importance of the issues that still require discussion;
 10. Agrees in principle with the objectives of sustainability, harmonisation, traceability, transparency, objectivity and non-discrimination, mentioned in point 4 of the communication; considers that establishing a single EU eco-label is bureaucratically cumbersome;

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11. Is convinced that the use of reliable eco-labels could be a very effective tool in combating illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, since it requires very clear documentation evidencing the provenance of the fish, which would make it much more difficult for illegal fish to enter the marketplace;
 12. Asks the Commission to clarify its understanding of a public Community label, since its analysis of option 2 ('Creating a single Community eco-labelling scheme for fish and fishery products') and option 3 ('Establishing minimum requirements for voluntary eco-labelling schemes') in the communication makes it unclear as to whether account has been taken of considerations in international fora regarding the ownership of an eco-labelling scheme;
 13. Takes the view that, once an eco-labelling and certification scheme has been set up, the Commission will need to promote and explain it to all those involved in the process; takes the view that the Commission will also need to ensure that confidence can be fully guaranteed with regard to compliance with the rules laid down by the bodies responsible for labelling and certification so that consumers are not misled;
 14. Urges the Commission to draw up a communication to the European Parliament and to the Council within six months, subject to developments in the broad debate, detailing the minimum requirements and guidelines with which a Community eco-labelling scheme for fisheries products must comply;
 15. Urges the Commission, further, to take into account international criteria relating to this matter, in particular the criteria set out by the FAO, when it comes to laying the foundations of an eco-labelling scheme for fisheries products in the EU, so that the scheme, amongst other things:
 - (a) is consistent with both the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the resolutions adopted by other international organisations, including the UN and the WTO;
 - (b) is voluntary and guarantees greater protection of the environment without any suggestion that non-labelled products are of an inferior quality;
 - (c) is transparent in every way, including its organic structure and financial provisions;
 - (d) is non-discriminatory and does not pose obstacles to trade, particularly as regards developing countries, whilst at the same time guaranteeing fair competition;
 - (e) is promoted by the Commission, which would be responsible for establishing rules governing its operation and guaranteeing the independence of specialist accreditation and certification bodies, key components in the procedure, as well as the credibility of the claims made by the label;
 - (f) incorporates sustainability criteria, based on serious scientific analysis, which must be set out with a greater level of stringency than the criteria governing the Community resources management system; the aforementioned criteria may be both general and specific depending on the various fisheries products;
 - (g) ensures that labels carry accurate information, which means guaranteeing the chain of custody for the product from fishing vessel to final consumer, i.e. it should be possible to track certification and check that the labelled product complies with the relevant specifications;
 - (h) incorporates independent and reliable auditing and verification procedures;
 - (i) receives the vital degree of publicity;
 - (j) opts for a label that includes the final result of the product's assessment in a way that is visible and easily understood by consumers;
 16. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments of the Member States.
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