Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No 708/2007 concerning use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture'

COM(2009) 541 final — 2009/0153 (CNS)

(2010/C 354/21)

Rapporteur: **Valerio SALVATORE**

On 11 November 2009 the Council, acting under Article 37 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, and on 5 March 2010 the European Parliament, acting under Article 43(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee on the

'*Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No 708/2007 concerning use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture*'

COM (2009) 541 final — 2009/0153 (CNS).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 25 February 2010.

At its 461st plenary session, held on 17 and 18 March 2010 (meeting of 17 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 130 votes with 3 abstentions.

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The Committee endorses the changes made to Regulation (EC) No 708/2007 concerning use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture in the light of new scientific knowledge, including the results of concerted action under the IMPASSE project funded by the Sixth Framework Programme.

1.2 It concurs with the declared intention to pursue the twofold goal of: a) minimising the risks involved in rearing alien and locally absent species, and b) cutting red tape for operators in the sector (the red tape in this instance being the national permits required by aquaculture facilities rearing alien and locally absent species).

1.3 The most important thing in order to achieve this is to make sure these facilities are biosecure. For this, the right measures need to be adopted: a) measures during transport, b) the application of well-defined protocols at the receiving facility, and c) the observance of appropriate procedures up to the release of fish products for consumption.

1.4 Where these matters are concerned, the new definition of closed aquaculture facilities appears well drafted and consistent with the results of the IMPASSE project, although some erroneous interpretations could occur as a result of the very technical language used. To forestall possible uncertainties in the implementation phase, the regulation should include a clear statement that closed aquaculture facilities are to be deemed such if they are land-based.

1.5 The new regulation establishes *inter alia* that closed aquaculture facilities must prevent the dispersal of non-native reared species or biological material in open waters as a result of flooding. To this end, a safety distance should be established between these facilities and open waters, depending on the type, location and lay-out of the facility site.

1.6 By the same token, since it has been established that the risk of escape lies not only in water, all systems should be put in place to ensure that closed facilities are protected from predators that could disperse the species reared.

1.7 Finally, the Committee agrees that movements from a closed to an open aquaculture facility should not be considered routine. It would therefore also suggest that closed aquaculture facilities should be managed and administered separately from open systems, when the production cycle so allows, in order to minimise any risk of contamination of aquatic ecosystems.

2. Introduction

2.1 With catches falling due to overfishing of seas and inland waters, aquaculture could play a role in helping to meet the growing demand for proteins from fish. Worldwide aquaculture production has, in fact, increased by 11 % annually over the last thirty years (Naylor and Burke, 2005) ([1]).

2.2 Against this backdrop, the introduction and rearing of alien and locally absent species in Europe is vigorously championed by economic and commercial players. These players must, however, embrace the goals of safeguarding ecosystems that could be vulnerable if such activities are not exercised correctly.

2.3 The introduction of alien species is, after all, one of the principal ways in which human intervention upsets aquatic ecosystems. It is also the second cause, immediately behind the destruction of habitats, of loss of biodiversity around the world. A delicate balance exists in all ecosystems – the fruit of a slow process of evolution thanks to which every organism interacts with its own environment, establishing a serious of relations with the space it occupies and with the other organisms present. In this situation, every organism plays a very precise role and occupies a well-defined ecological niche. The effects of climate change on the migration of fish species in the various aquatic environments also merit attention.

2.4 When an alien species enters and becomes part of a new community, it interacts with the species already there and in so doing can alter the balances previously achieved in a way that cannot be predicted. The new inhabitants may prey on and compete with indigenous species for food and space; they may carry new parasites and other pathogens from their countries of origin or they may hybridise with indigenous species.

2.5 This is why the key elements of 'closed aquaculture facilities' need to be stipulated – i.e. a physical barrier between wild and farmed organisms, treatment of solid waste, appropriate disposal of dead organisms, and the monitoring and treatment of incoming and outgoing water.

3. General comments

3.1 The fewer control systems in place, the greater the risk of alien and locally absent species escaping from rearing facilities. This risk is minimised in closed systems, where aquaculture is confined within secure structures protected by physical and chemical barriers; extensive open systems, on the other hand, offer the lowest level of security, sometimes facilitating the – sometimes inadvertent – dispersal of the imported species into natural environments.

3.2 Estimates indicate that around 20 % of non-native cultured species are farmed in open systems, while less than 10 % are farmed in intensive closed systems. However, in some cases (bivalves), live products are temporarily sent – sometimes substantial distances – for the depuration phase to both closed and open facilities, with high risks of dispersal (IMPASSE) ([2]).

3.3 Closed systems use various technologies for the depuration of incoming and outgoing water. All of them, however, involve a physical separation between the facility and natural aquatic ecosystems. Nevertheless, the rapid development of these rearing technologies and the evolution of various aquaculture systems have prompted the Council to issue the regulation being discussed in this opinion.

3.4 Council Regulation (EC) No 708/2007 establishes a framework governing aquaculture practices in relation to alien and locally absent species in order to assess and minimise the possible impact of those species on aquatic habitats. The regulation provides for a permit system to be established at national level.

3.5 These permits are not required where closed aquaculture facilities guarantee biosecurity. In order to reduce the risk, appropriate measures need to be adopted during transport, with well-defined protocols being followed at the receiving facility and appropriate procedures being observed up to the release of fish products for consumption.

3.6 The new definition of closed aquaculture facilities satisfactorily incorporates the results of the IMPASSE project; however, it should be expanded to include a clear reference to the fact that closed aquaculture facilities are to be regarded as such if they are land-based.

3.7 The Committee fully endorses the goal of preventing solid waste or reared specimens or parts of these from passing into open waters, as provided for in the new regulation. However, the waste water filtration and depuration sector is a rapidly evolving one and there is a range of systems – physical, chemical, biological, or indeed a combination of these – which can be used to achieve the priority that must always be centre stage, namely biosecurity.

([1]) Naylor, R. and Burke, M. (2005). Aquaculture and Ocean Resources: Raising Tigers of the Sea. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. 30:185-218.

([2]) IMPASSE project No 44142. D1.3. Deliverable 3.1. Review of risk assessment protocols associated with aquaculture, including the environmental, disease, genetic and economic issues of operations concerned with the introduction and translocation of species. (Gordon H. Copp, Esther Areikin, Abdellah Benabdelmouna, J. Robert Britton, Ian G. Cowx, Stephan Gollasch, Rodolphe E. Gozlan, Glyn Jones, Sylvie Lapègue, Paul J. Midtlyng, L. Miossec, Andy D. Nunn, Anna Occhipinti Ambrogi, S. Olenin, Edmund Peeler, Ian C. Russell, Dario Savini). 2008 – (page 14).

4. **Specific comments**

4.1 Appropriate monitoring and control measures must be specified for the introduction and transfer of alien or locally absent aquatic species in order to avoid any risk of aquatic ecosystems being contaminated. This can only be done by establishing, adopting and implementing international codes of practice and appropriate procedures.

4.2 Since it has been established that the risk of escape lies not only in water, all systems should be put in place to ensure that closed facilities are protected from predators, especially birds, that could disperse reared specimens into the wild.

4.3 It is also desirable for closed aquaculture facilities to be managed and administered separately from open systems in order to minimise any possible risk of contamination of aquatic ecosystems.

4.4 The Committee agrees with the decision to entrust Member States with the responsibility for regularly updating on a website the list of closed aquaculture facilities in their territory so as to ensure that these are as well publicised as possible in order to make operators and the various local stakeholders more responsible regarding the correct management of facilities.

Brussels, 17 March 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI