

Sustainable aquaculture

- This topic appears on our WG3 agenda today as a result of the work on the AAC Recommendation on the EU Taxonomy, which was completed in May 2026.
- Specifically on what types of aquaculture are sustainable: extensive vs intensive, non-fed vs fed, low-carbon, etc., etc.
- Today's debate is not aimed at producing an AAC recommendation document, unless decided otherwise. Instead, it's a non-finalist open exchange of views.

What do we mean by sustainability?

- FAO defines sustainable development as *the management and conservation of the natural resource base, and the orientation of technological and institutional change in such a manner as to ensure the attainment and continued satisfaction of human needs for present and future generations. Such sustainable development (in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors) conserves land, water, plant and animal genetic resources, is environmentally non-degrading, technologically appropriate, economically viable and socially acceptable.*
- Highlights:
 - Sustainability is not a final destination; it's a continuous path.
 - Milestones are not fixed; they evolve with time, culture and geographical location.
 - Sustainability has three intertwined pillars: environmental, social, and economic (which also cover governance and animal welfare).
- We heard this morning that the EC does not have a precise definition of “sustainable aquaculture”, but a comprehensive description of scope could be a good starting point. Hint: DG MARE mentioned that it favours aquaculture that provides “ecosystem and climate benefits”, which is not necessarily very business-friendly.

What does this mean for the sustainable develop. of aquaculture?

1. Aquaculture matters because it is about food production and food security. Examples of production that cannot be scaled, replicated, or stand the test of time are not sustainable development; they are just stories or misleading anecdotes about food production.
2. A realistic view of spatial planning across the EU must be considered. Space is scarce, and aquaculture and other activities are being squeezed out. Producing significant amounts of food in limited areas inevitably leads to intensified production.
3. Income adequacy is a key factor. Barely making money is not enough. Adopting more technological farming methods, or moving offshore, is only viable if it provides sufficient, reliable income to cover costs, reward labour and risk, and ensure long-term operation without external support.
4. Real-world economic calculations must guide investments, not the wishful thinking often found in the business plans of research projects. Now and then, disastrous weather events, market crises, and other shocks do happen, breaking weak business plans. Yet too many projects rely on overly optimistic assumptions. The real business world is (very) tough.
5. Moreover, income adequacy is also necessary to protect against predators and theft.

What about the carbon footprint?

1. Carbon footprint is often hailed as the key sustainability indicator. It's certainly relevant, but we should not overstress it in isolation, because by 2050, the EU aims for aquaculture to be carbon-neutral, and all food sectors will be in the same position.
2. In the meantime, our focus should shift toward the carbon footprint of whole menus and processing/cooking methods, not just the raw materials themselves, as these have different nutritional densities.
3. Food waste multiplies the carbon footprint of any specific food. Cheap foodstuffs tend to suffer more waste (and a larger carbon footprint) than expensive ones.

It's the market, stupid! [James Carville for Bill Clinton, 1992]

1. A fundamental principle: sustainable development can only happen when production is market-led. Promoting the production of food that society does not demand in sufficient quantities is simply a bad political decision.
2. Today, the EC (Mission Oceans) is pushing for a future EU aquaculture production based on partial assumptions (i.e. seaweed), not in a holistic way, which misleads policymakers, opinion leaders and social acceptance.
3. Be cautious when trusting policy recommendations that stem from research projects, as they are too often partial and overly shaped by the pursuit of funding by research teams.
4. Long-term policy views are necessary, but timing is to be considered.
5. Promoting the production of food that society does not demand in sufficient quantities is a bad political decision that creates a death valley for companies that enter it.
6. Private initiative directs investment toward the highest-value (including social) opportunities.

What aquatic food should we produce? (Conclusions)

1. Many types of aquaculture can contribute to sustainable development in the EU.
2. How you do, and where, is more important than what you do. Being dogmatic is to be avoided.
3. The European Commission is mistaken in sidelining fed aquaculture in favour of seaweed farming, and in demonising the concept of intensive farming.
4. This EC perspective benefits only nearby countries such as Türkiye and Norway. We in the EU are the ones creating the level-playing-field challenges for ourselves.
5. As FAO insists, responsible intensive fed-aquaculture is to be supported for its contribution to real-world demands of food security, due to spatial limitations and economic viability.