



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,  
MARE.A.2/BVT

**Subject: AAC Recommendation on “Using ethology, an understanding of fish behaviour, to improve fish welfare”**

Dear Mr Thomsen,

I would like to thank you for your email of 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023 including the “*Recommendation on using ethology, an understanding of fish behaviour, to improve fish welfare*”.

The Commission acknowledges that the welfare of fish in aquaculture is considered increasingly important, as mentioned in the Recommendation, and is acting upon it. The “*Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030*”<sup>(1)</sup> identified animal welfare as a priority. In the context of the implementation of the guidelines, a document on “Good Husbandry Practices for aquaculture” is under development and will address welfare aspects. A code of good practices on fish welfare and fish welfare indicators throughout the production chain will be developed in 2024.

In the Recommendation, the Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC) includes a number of recommendations specifically for the Commission, notably:

*The Commission, together with the Fish Reference Centre, should coordinate exchanges between aquaculture operators, scientists, and NGOs to explore and develop environmental enrichment options in aquaculture, and connect this activity to its objective in the Strategic Guidelines to map best husbandry practices including environmental enrichment.*

One of the key priorities of the Commission is to promote an enhanced dialogue on animal welfare issues that are relevant at an EU level among competent authorities, businesses, civil society, and scientists. To achieve this goal, in 2017 the Commission established the 'EU Platform on Animal Welfare'. The Platform brings together the Commission, Member States, livestock chain stakeholders, NGOs, and independent experts, with the aim to develop coordinated actions through exchanges of information

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<sup>(1)</sup> COM(2021)236 final  
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and best practices, as well as the direct involvement and use of voluntary commitments of stakeholders to further improve animal welfare. A voluntary initiative on the welfare of fish has emerged from the EU platform to improve the welfare of fish.

Additionally, the Commission has agreed with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on an indicative roadmap for scientific output in animal welfare of aquatic animals to be delivered from 2023 to 2030. In this context, the Commission plans to send a mandate to EFSA on the welfare of farmed trout in 2024. This output should help to increase the knowledge and scientific evidence of potential animal welfare issues for aquatic animals.

Welfare of aquatic animals is of increasing importance, and new farming practices are developing in the Union and expected to continue developing in the future. The Commission is aware of the increasing demands to address the welfare of farmed aquatic animals and will continue working with all actors involved in the EU Platform on Animal Welfare to improve the life of these animals.

Further, I would like to recall that the Commission is currently carrying out a revision of the EU animal welfare legislation as foreseen under the Farm to Fork Strategy, with a view to align it with the latest scientific evidence and current political priorities, to broaden its scope and to better address citizen expectations. On 7 December 2023, the Commission adopted the first legislative proposal under this revision, to revise current EU rules on the protection of animals during transport<sup>2</sup>. This legislative proposal introduces for the first time an Annex with specific requirements on the protection of aquatic animals during transport. The work on other planned legislative proposals, including legislation for the welfare of animals at farm level (including aquaculture farms), at the time of killing and to establish a voluntary European label for animal welfare, is ongoing.

*The EU Animal Welfare Reference Centre for fish should prioritise behaviour in its work programme.*

The new EU Reference centre for welfare of aquatic animals, the designation of which is expected beginning of 2024, will provide technical support, and coordinated assistance to EU Member States in carrying out official controls in the field of aquatic animal welfare. The centre will provide scientific and technical expertise, carry out studies, develop methods for improving and assessing the welfare level of animals, and contribute to the dissemination of good practices in the EU, in accordance with the priorities and activities reflected in its future work programme. In particular, the new centre will support Member States and the Commission in the implementation of good practices on aquatic animal welfare by providing scientific and technical expertise for the development and application of the animal welfare indicators.

*EU funded research projects in aquaculture should prioritise behaviour and welfare within their research programmes.*

Horizon Europe, i.e., the EU framework programme for research and innovation, supports research on fish ethology and welfare with projects such as Cure4Aqua and

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<sup>2</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of animals during transport and related operations, amending Council Regulation (EC) No 1255/97 and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005, COM/2023/770 final

IGNITION. Additionally, the “European Partnership on Animal Health and Welfare” is expected to address fish welfare issues alongside welfare issues of terrestrial animals.

I am looking forward to our continued fruitful cooperation. Should you have any further questions on this reply, please contact Ms Julia RUBECK, coordinator of the Advisory Councils (Julia.rubeck@ec.europa.eu; +32.2.296.88.89), who will forward them to relevant colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

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