



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,
MARE.A.2/BVT

Subject: AAC Recommendation on the dissemination, communication and exploitation of research and innovation for European aquaculture

Dear Mr Brian Thomsen,

I would like to thank you for your mail of 31 October 2025. including the “*Recommendation on the dissemination, communication and exploitation of research and innovation for European aquaculture*”.

In this Recommendation, the Aquaculture Advisory Council specifically recommends the following points to the European Commission:

Publicly Funded Research Call Design and DEC Requirements

- *EU-funded research and innovation calls should place increased emphasis on DEC actions within call design and project proposal templates including increased reviewer scores being allocated to DEC activities and innovation transfer.*

For topics under Horizon Europe Pillar 2, DEC actions are assessed under the impact criterion. Particularly for innovation actions and in case of ex aequo, this is the criterion that has more weight.

- *Where relevant, practical application of project outputs/findings should be encouraged and specified.*

Horizon Europe Pillar 2 funds open, wide, and non-prescriptive research and innovation of medium Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), i.e. not completely basic research and not completely ready for market innovation. The application of relevant outputs is encouraged and facilitated by the participation of relevant SMEs and other businesses, as well as other stakeholders.

Mr. Brian Thomsen
Chairman of the AAC
Email : brian@danskakvakultur.dk
Rue de la Science, 10
B – 1000 Brussels
Belgium

Commission européenne/Europese Commissie, 1049 Bruxelles/Brussel, BELGIQUE/BELGIË - Tel. +32 22991111
Office: J-99 05/014 - Tel. direct line +32 229-50483

charlina.vitcheva@ec.europa.eu

- *Work should be undertaken to identify practical solutions contained within research results already undertaken, with a focus on application by primary producers and others in the aquaculture value chain.*

For aquaculture, a portfolio analysis ⁽¹⁾ was performed in 2021, identifying tangible results developed in Horizon 2020 projects. Additional future analyses could be considered for Horizon Europe projects towards the end of the programme.

- *Industry partners should be encouraged and included within project consortia wherever possible, with increased weighting being given to those project proposals that include direct industry or other appropriate stakeholder engagement.*

As mentioned above, industry partners and other relevant stakeholders are indeed encouraged to participate to aquaculture-relevant projects and their meaningful participation is assessed under the impact criterion.

- *The recruitment of external evaluators should be advertised and undertaken across all stakeholders, with assistance being sought from representative multi-actor organisations where needed (e.g. Advisory Councils, Research Frameworks, Partnerships, Technology Platforms, Industry Associations and Producer Organisations).*

Experts to assist in selecting proposals and to review the progress of ongoing projects are selected by the relevant executive agencies. Attention is given to include, as much as possible, experts from both academia and industry and to have a gender and geographical balance. Experts interested in selecting and reviewing projects can register in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal ⁽²⁾.

- *The topics of the research calls should include market-driven areas that address current knowledge gaps and innovation challenges in the aquaculture sector. At the same time, policy driven call topics should be promoted subject to economic and market assessments.*

Horizon Europe topics are driven by both policy and market considerations, taking into account inputs from stakeholders, including industry, academia, NGOs etc. The topics are proposed by the Commission and discussed with EU Member States and Horizon-Associated Countries in the relevant Programme Committees. According to the Commission proposal for Horizon Europe 2028-2034, the programme will be developed in close connection with the European Competitiveness Fund and together they will offer support for the entire investment journey of a project, from conception phase to scale-up.

Aquaculture Research Annual Event

- *DG RTD/DG MARE, with due reference to other Directorates, reference centres and agencies should seek the assistance of / work with multi-actor platforms to run annual DEC research days, presenting portfolio analysis and project highlights from EU funded research (Horizon, EU Partnerships, EMFAF, LIFE, FLAG, ERDF etc.). Such events might follow the format of technical seminars and workshops. Focus should be given on how best to reach producers at the farm / local / regional level. This may be supported through the AAM (see below) and undertaken with existing multi-actor platforms for aquaculture research (e.g. Technology and Innovation Platforms – EATiP, FABRE TP, FoodDrinkEurope).*

⁽¹⁾ <https://aquaculture.ec.europa.eu/knowledge-base/reports/portfolio-analysis-horizon-2020-aquaculture-projects>

⁽²⁾ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/work-as-an-expert>

The Commission will take into consideration your proposal to organise an annual aquaculture research event, subject to the availability of the necessary resources.

Infrastructure and Analysis

- *Continuing support should be given to Transnational Access to Research Infrastructures (TNAs), but TNAs must include industry consultation and engagement (e.g. through Industry Research Advisory Panels). Regular portfolio analysis, with consideration of knowledge transfer and impact, should continue to be undertaken for all aquaculture sectors (Marine, Freshwater, Finfish, Shellfish, Algae, Value Chain, etc.).*

Under Horizon Europe, AQUAEXCEL3.0⁽³⁾ builds on previous Horizon 2020 and Framework Programme 7 projects and aims to further ensure research is aligned with industry needs, to boost the EU aquaculture sector by expanding the Transnational Access programme, and to develop new tools to keep pace with rapid scientific development and add value to existing tools and resources to benefit all users. An Industry & Research Advisory Panel contributes both to upstream guidance (e.g. industry needs recommendations) as well as to downstream impact/dissemination as it aims at maximising the possibilities for new knowledge to be translated into innovation. In the Commission proposal for Horizon Europe 2028-2034, more support for research and technology infrastructures is proposed under Pillar 4, by funding cutting-edge research and technology infrastructures and supporting facilities, resources and services.

- *Consideration should be given as to how best research Extension Services might serve knowledge transfer to beneficiaries in the bioeconomy and food sectors.*

Under the Horizon Results Booster scheme⁽⁴⁾, there are services that help projects to boost the dissemination and exploitation of research results and guide them to the market and the wider world. Among the success stories there is, for example, a case on a personalised nutrition solution based on gut bacteria⁽⁵⁾.

Smart Specialisation Strategies and Regional Innovation Transfer

- *Greater support should be given, including financial support, for the Aquaculture Thematic Smart Specialisation Platform (TSSP) to foster and encourage interregional innovation transfer. Again, focus should be given on how best to reach producers at the farm/local/regional level and to promote uptake of S3 strategies for the Blue Economy at the regional level.*

The S3 Thematic Platform for a Sustainable Blue Economy facilitates the creation of multi-stakeholder interregional partnerships within the blue economy sectors, including smart circular aquaculture. It operates under the Community of Practice on Smart Specialisation, the Commission's main network for guidance, support, and peer learning in Smart Specialisation.

Regarding financial support, the Community of Practice and its thematic platforms are not directly linked to specific EU funding streams. Instead, they require that partners invest their own resources to advance activities within their respective partnerships. While some partnerships across all four thematic platforms, including the Sustainable Blue Economy platform, have successfully secured joint funding for specific projects, most rely on the contributions from leading regions or organisations.

⁽³⁾ <https://aquaexcel.eu/>

⁽⁴⁾ <https://www.horizonresultsbooster.eu/>

⁽⁵⁾ <https://www.horizonresultsbooster.eu/SuccessStories/Details?title=STANCE4HEALTH%253a-The-First-Personalized-Nutrition-Solution-Based-on-Gut-Bacteria>

Therefore, although partnerships do not receive direct financial support, their primary role is to facilitate collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the co-design of solutions among stakeholders. To effectively harness the potential of these partnerships, it is important to involve all stakeholders from the targeted value chain, such as producers, along with regions sharing similar interests or priorities. This approach fosters ownership of partnership activities among leading regions and partners, contributing to the successful implementation of Smart Specialisation strategies at both regional and interregional levels.

- *Greater support should be provided for EU cluster actions relating to knowledge transfer, including testing facilities, incubators and accelerator programmes.*

Thematic partnerships are designed to bring together stakeholders with a shared interest in developing new value chains in specific priority areas, aligning with Smart Specialisation strategies. Partners should therefore broaden the partnership scope to include all relevant stakeholders across the value chain, particularly cluster organizations, businesses, and innovation entities that seek complementary expertise beyond regional borders. This way, partnerships can facilitate the exchange of best practices, policy alignment, and the co-design of investment projects.

Knowledge transfer is a core activity supported by the Community of Practice. Through the Community of Practice, the Commission provides support services for smart partnering that connect stakeholders within a specific value chain to potential partners and resources, including startups that offer incubators and accelerator programs. Additionally, advanced partnerships benefit from services focused on demonstration, commercialization, and scale-up efforts.

- *Allocation of funds (e.g. EMFAF) to promote aquaculture research knowledge transfer (linked to S3 / clustering / regional activities) both at the European and MS level.*

In 2024, the European Commission published a call for projects under the EMFAF to support smart specialisation and innovation in the blue economy. The call attracted a record number of applications, resulting in the awarding of grants to only two projects after a thorough evaluation process assessing their relevance, quality, and impact.

Given the limited budget of the EMFAF, partnerships are encouraged to explore other funding opportunities that support regional innovation ecosystems and cross-regional collaboration, such as those available under the Interregional Innovation Investment (I3) Instrument, Interreg, and Horizon Europe.

At the national level, Member States and, in some cases, regions are responsible for mobilising funding to support projects aligned with national and regional Smart Specialization strategies. This approach fosters tailored innovation that addresses the unique strengths and needs of various regions and sectors. Stakeholders seeking more detailed information on open calls are encouraged to reach out to their national authorities responsible for managing cohesion funds and the EMFAF.

- *Support, including financial support, should be made eligible for non-EU countries that are leaders in aquaculture research and innovation, allowing for successful technology and research transfer between regions.*

For calls at the EU level, it is important to highlight that those under the EMFAF and other funding instruments, like Interreg and Horizon Europe, are often open to non-EU participants. However, participation from non-EU countries may be restricted in certain calls and can be subject to specific conditions.

Associated countries typically have formal agreements that enable them to participate under terms similar to those for EU Member States. For precise eligibility criteria and conditions, applicants are advised to carefully review the specific call text.

Aquaculture Assistance Mechanism (AAM)

Regarding the recommendations related to the AAM, we will consider them carefully and – subject to the availability of resources – take them into account in the renewal of the AAM contract starting in July 2026.

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 (MARE-AC@ec.europa.eu; +32.2.296.88.89), who will forward them to relevant colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

Charlina VITCHEVA

c.c.: Cynthia Benites: Cynthia.benites@aac-europe.org ; secretariat@aac-europe.org;