SPEECH

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Deterring illegal activities in the fisheries sector

Press conference for the presentation of the JRC Reference Report " Deterring illegal activities in the fisheries sector"

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am proud to present a new study here today: ‘Deterring Illegal Activities in the Fisheries Sector’. It is an important work on the role of science in the fight against illegal fishing.

Illegal fishing is said to be worth 10 billion euro per year worldwide. It is a criminal activity which negatively affects the global economy, disrupts marine ecosystems, and damages fisheries communities and consumers.

This report shows how new molecular techniques, such as genetics, genomics, chemistry and forensics can mark a breakthrough against this kind of crime.

This little glimpse into the future comes from rigorous research carried out by the European Commission’s in-house science service, the Joint Research Centre. I present it here today also on behalf of my counterpart for Research, Innovation and Science: Commissioner Màire Geoghegan-Quinn.

Scientific advice is the stepping stone of the Common Fisheries Policy: we rely on it to determine how to reach the sustainable exploitation of fish stocks or guarantee a healthy fishing sector in Europe. The Joint Research Centre is an essential provider of such advice. In this case, science is used to help enforce the EU fisheries rules.

And its help is most welcome. Without proper control and enforcement, our policy is toothless. Without respect for the rules in EU waters and beyond, there can be no sustainable fisheries.

Over the last few years, the European Union has adopted several instruments to improve the degree of compliance with fisheries rules, for instance the Fisheries Control Regulation and the Regulation against illegal fishing, which came into force in January 2010.

These introduced a system of certification proving that catches comply with the rules and a system guaranteeing the traceability of products “from net to plate”. But there have been cases in which catch reports or product labels were falsified, and in which the wrong species or the wrong geographical origins were stated by operators.

Today's report addresses precisely these issues, and provides scientific evidence that modern technologies can be successfully used to deter or spot fraud.

The author of the report, Dr. Jann Martinsohn, will now explain to you how innovative technologies can be used to determine the true species and origin of fish without the shadow of a doubt. But before leaving the floor to him, I would like to leave you with a real-life example of how these techniques can be applied in practice.

Last year a Belgian fisher moored in the port of Liverpool and said he had a catch of sand sole, a relatively cheap kind of fish which he was allowed to fish. But the fisheries inspectors were not convinced.

The catch had been cleaned and filleted, so it was impossible to tell what species it was. So the inspectors ordered a DNA test, and it turned out that it was in fact the much more expensive common sole – a species subject to strict fishing quotas. Based on this evidence, the fisher was sentenced by the Liverpool court to pay a fine of 15 000 euro.

The challenge now will be transferring these technologies into the day-to-day practice across Europe. The report explores and discusses potential avenues to reach this goal.

But meanwhile, I want to stress that this is a topical moment: we are making the ever important "first step" into a new era. An era, not so far away, in which molecular technology and genetics become the bread and butter of fisheries control and enforcement, just as they are common practice in law enforcement.

This will reward and protect in primis those fishermen who fish responsibly and by the rules. But most importantly, it will benefit all of us as consumers. It will reassure us that, once the product reaches the shops, it has been fished sustainably – which is all we need to know.