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Report on the outcomes of the debate of the 46th Session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

Executive Summary

The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) is the regional fisheries management organization established under the provisions of Article XIV of the FAO Constitution to rationally manage fisheries and sustainably develop aquaculture in all marine waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. Fifteen of its 23 contracting parties, including the European Union, and four of its six cooperating non-contracting parties are currently FAO Members from the Europe and Central Asia region. At its last annual session, in November 2023, the GFCM adopted a significant number of management measures for both the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea – the most in the history of the GFCM. Furthermore, as a result of the launch of the *GFCM 2030 Strategy for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea*, the GFCM is strengthening its contributions to accelerating progress at the regional level towards meeting the targets set out in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water).

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I. General background information

1. The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) was established in 1949, pursuant to Article XIV of the FAO Constitution, and its constitutive agreement came into force in 1952. In 2014, the GFCM amended this agreement for the fourth time, with a view to modernizing its institutional and legal framework and furthering its role, including in Europe and Central Asia. This role is of primary importance, given that 15 of the 23 contracting parties to the GFCM and four of its six cooperating non-contracting parties are FAO Members belonging to the Europe and Central Asia region.

2. By negotiating for and adopting binding recommendations, the GFCM aims to ensure the conservation and sustainable use, at biological, social, economic and environmental levels, of living marine resources, as well as the sustainable development of aquaculture in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region. The implementation of these recommendations is facilitated by the GFCM Secretariat, which backstops the Commission's subsidiary bodies, namely the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Aquaculture, the Compliance Committee, the Committee on Administration and Finance and the Working Group on the Black Sea.

3. The primary challenges affecting the Mediterranean and Black Sea region remain the overexploitation of main commercial species, the interactions between fisheries/aquaculture and other human activities, and the incidence of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. However, as a result of continuous efforts being made by the GFCM to promote a subregional approach in addressing fisheries and aquaculture issues, including through ad hoc management plans that include compliance measures, progress has been encouraging in the implementation of measures put in place by contracting parties. This was also made possible, at the operational level, by the establishment of several subregional technical units by the GFCM, of which three are operational (in Burgas, Bulgaria, for the Black Sea; in Málaga, Spain, for the western Mediterranean; and in Split, Croatia, for the Adriatic Sea) while the other two are in progress (in Tunis, Tunisia, for the central Mediterranean; and in Beirut, Lebanon, for the eastern Mediterranean).

4. As a way to monitor advances, including in addressing the challenges mentioned above, the GFCM regularly publishes a report on the State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries. In 2023, this report included aquaculture for the first time. The latest report also highlighted that the percentage of overfished stocks in the Mediterranean and Black Sea has fallen below 60 percent for the first time, following a decreasing trend that started a decade ago, with a gradual reduction of fishing pressure of more than 30 percent since 2012. *The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries* report states that, in contrast to capture fisheries, the region's marine aquaculture sector is growing significantly, with marine and brackish water aquaculture production and revenues nearly doubled over the past decade.

II. Relevant outcomes of the last GFCM session

5. The 46th Session of the GFCM was held in person from 6 to 10 November 2023 in Split, Croatia.

6. A total of 24 binding recommendations were adopted, a historical high for the GFCM. These recommendations address, among others, the following issues: the establishment of a multiannual management plan for the sustainable exploitation of common dolphinfish in the Mediterranean Sea; additional provisions for the fisheries restricted area in the Gulf of Lion; the definition of a minimum conservation reference size for giant red shrimp and blue and red shrimp in the Strait of Sicily, the Levant Sea and the Ionian Sea; the extension of the transitional fishing regime and the establishment of catch limits in 2024 for small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic Sea; the implementation of a fishing effort regime in 2024 for key demersal stocks in the Adriatic Sea; the extension of the multiannual management plan for turbot fisheries in the Black Sea; the extension of management measures for sustainable piked dogfish fisheries in the Black Sea; the extension of the regional research programme for rapa whelk fisheries in the Black Sea; the extension of management measures for the sustainable exploitation of European sprat in the Black Sea; the mitigation of bottlenose dolphin depredation in small pelagic fisheries in the southern Alboran Sea; the establishment of a regional fishing capacity

management plan; the amendment of the existing management plans for the sustainable exploitation of red coral in the Mediterranean Sea; the revision of the minimum conservation reference size for blackspot seabream in the Alboran Sea; the reinforcement of the existing long-term management plan for European eel in the Mediterranean Sea; the establishment of a permanent international joint inspection and surveillance scheme for common dolphinfish fisheries outside waters under national jurisdiction in the Mediterranean Sea; the establishment of a permanent international joint inspection and surveillance scheme outside waters under national jurisdiction in the Adriatic Sea; the establishment of a catch documentation scheme for red coral in the Mediterranean Sea; the establishment of a catch documentation scheme for turbot in the Black Sea; vessel sightings; compliance issues and corresponding actions; the application of compliance recommendations; and the establishment of a list of vessels presumed to have carried out illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. In addition to these, the 46th Session of the GFCM adopted 14 non-binding resolutions, including a growing number of decisions providing guidance on how to address environmental challenges, including climate change, in developing a productive and sustainable aquaculture sector.

7. It is worth recalling that in 2021, the GFCM launched the *GFCM 2030 Strategy for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea*. This strategy embodies the continued commitment by the GFCM to providing a united vision for the region and is furthered by the provisions contained in the adopted decisions. To date, the GFCM has executed a multitude of initiatives within the purview of this strategy. Among them are the following noteworthy endeavours: the High-level conference on MedFish4Ever initiatives, held in Malta in October 2023; the International Symposium on Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences, held in Trabzon, Türkiye, in October 2023; and the second edition of the GFCM Forum on Fisheries Science in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, held in Antalya, Türkiye, from 19 to 23 February 2024.

8. The enhanced quality of scientific advice provided by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Fisheries and the Working Group on the Black Sea has been recognized and, particularly within the framework of the MedSea4Fish and BlackSea4Fish projects, the GFCM has proven effective in bolstering national capacities to implement practical activities on a variety of topics, including surveys at sea, vulnerable species, non-indigenous species, decarbonization and small-scale fisheries. The ongoing dynamic phase through which the Scientific Advisory Committee on Aquaculture is currently going is contributing to facilitating the dissemination of good practices in the sustainable development of aquaculture, and the efforts by the Compliance Committee are being redoubled with respect to piloting inspection schemes and collecting information on monitoring, control and surveillance. As of 2023, the implementation of two projects related to the ecosystem-based approach – funded by the Global Environment Facility, implemented by FAO and executed by the GFCM, in close cooperation with relevant authorities in beneficiary countries – has been taking place.

9. The GFCM adopted its workplan for 2023–2025 and approved its autonomous budget for 2024 (amounting to USD 2 462 221) and the autonomous budgets for 2025 and 2026 (USD 2 462 221 each year).