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Subject:	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION Ex post evaluation of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) for the programming period 2014-2020

Delegations will find attached document SWD(2026) 270 final.

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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

Ex post evaluation of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) for the programming period 2014-2020

{SWD(2026) 269 final}

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Background

The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) established under Regulation (EU) 2014/508 was the EU's funding instrument for maritime and fisheries policies from 2014-2020. It aimed to support the implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP), while also contributing to the Europe 2020 strategy. It was designed to contribute to increased international commitments in the field of ocean governance, especially in the context of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and aimed for stronger synergies with other EU policies, such as on food security, the sustainable blue economy and support for the EU's climate objectives. The EMFF was one of the five European Structural and Investment funds (ESI Funds) which complemented each other to deliver more jobs, welfare and growth in the EU and were covered by the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR). The overall objectives of the EMFF are to contribute to:

1. promoting competitive, environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially responsible fisheries and aquaculture;
2. fostering the implementation of the CFP;
3. promoting a balanced and inclusive territorial development of fisheries and aquaculture areas;
4. fostering the development and implementation of the Union's IMP in a manner complementary to cohesion policy and to the CFP.

   Complementary international instruments—namely Fisheries Partnership Agreements (FPAs) and compulsory RFMO contributions—remained outside the scope of the EMFF.

The EMFF was allocated a budget of approximately EUR 6.4 billion for the 2014–2020 period. It operated under two main management modes:

- 89% under shared management with the Member States by means of operational programmes.
- 11% managed (in)directly by the European Commission to support EU-wide objectives in maritime and coastal affairs.

The specific objectives for the EMFF for the shared management were structured around **six Union Priorities.** The direct management component of EMFF financed measures and structures to deliver the data, advice, organisational structures, information systems and intelligence needed to implement the EU's fisheries policy effectively.

Main findings

The EMFF delivered moderate overall effectiveness, with mixed results across objectives. It supported the sustainability, competitiveness, and viability of fisheries and aquaculture, notably through innovation in aquaculture and the blue economy, community-led local development (CLLD) via FLAGs, and EU-level data and control systems such as EMODnet.

However, it was less successful in tackling fleet overcapacity or driving systemic transformation, while progress on environmental objectives, including bycatch reduction, remained partial and uneven. Its impact was further constrained by administrative burdens, implementation delays, and differences in the uptake of operations across Member States, which particularly affected small-scale operators. While EMFF investments in fisheries supported a reduction of the negative environmental impacts of fisheries, particularly in bycatch reductions, the overall effectiveness in significantly lowering unwanted catches across the EU is inconclusive because major factors influencing bycatch cannot be addressed by the EMFF.

The EMFF may have played a certain role in advancing marine biodiversity protection and restoration in the EU fisheries and aquaculture sector. This Fund enabled a wide range of conservation and innovation projects and was positively received by stakeholders. However, the complexity of attributing ecosystem improvements to specific funding streams within the EMFF, but also across other Funds such as LIFE and Horizon, and the underperformance in expanding other marine protected areas, highlight areas for future attention. Continued, well-targeted investment and improved monitoring will be essential to sustain and build upon these achievements.

The EMFF was useful and relevant, but not consistently transformative. It performed best as a support instrument for individual investments, local initiatives and sustainability measures. It was less effective where success depended on deep structural change.

Overall effectiveness varies considerably between territories. Outcomes depend on factors such as the size of available budgets, the efficiency of national and regional delivery systems, and the administrative capacity of local actors. Despite these differences, CLLD is widely seen as valuable for fostering participation, strengthening governance, and delivering targeted local development in fisheries and coastal areas.

In terms of efficiency, the EMFF was reasonably cost-efficient, but its performance was weakened by administrative complexity. Compliance costs were especially significant for small-scale beneficiaries, reaching an estimated of 5–10%. Although measures such as digital tools and simplified cost options improved implementation in some cases, these gains were uneven across Member States. The Fund showed particular value in crisis response, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine, but its limited flexibility in re-allocating resources and the low uptake of financial instruments reduced its flexibility.

The design of the EMFF Regulation ensured coherence by integrating multiple Union Priorities to promote complementary actions and was well aligned with the Common Fisheries Policy and with wider EU maritime and environmental objectives. The EMFF was designed to be externally coherent with other EU funds, notably those supporting sustainable development, environmental protection, economic growth, and job creation. Unlike its predecessor (EFF), the EMFF followed the same regulatory framework as other structural funds, which facilitated better alignment and coordination. Despite occasional challenges (such as administrative complexity due to the unique needs of fisheries beneficiaries, fragmented project structures or uneven support for small-scale operators), the EMFF demonstrated a high level of internal coherence and successfully generated synergies across objectives and sectors. These outcomes were supported by both regulatory design and implementation practices that fostered cross-cutting, mutually reinforcing interventions.

The Fund also remained highly relevant to the sector’s evolving needs. It addressed major challenges including climate change, sustainability pressures, competing maritime uses, and the socio-economic vulnerability of coastal communities. Its capacity to adapt in times of crisis reinforced its importance as a resilience instrument. However, its broad scope sometimes weakened strategic focus. Ongoing structural challenges-such as fleet overcapacity, climate threats, social exclusion, and administrative burdens-demonstrate a continuing need for such an EU-level fund. Priorities such as decarbonisation, food security, and resilience confirm the continuing need for support under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF). To remain fully relevant, future programmes should strengthen coordination, broaden innovation uptake, improve inclusiveness, and enhance monitoring and compliance systems.

Finally, the EMFF generated clear EU added value by addressing transnational challenges such as shared fish stocks, illegal fishing, and marine data systems, while supporting common standards and cross-border cooperation. Through its combination of shared management and direct management, the EMFF helped to ensure that implementation of fisheries policy is guided by common EU priorities, rather than by fragmented or short-term national considerations alone. It provided both the financial support and the governance framework necessary for the effective delivery of the CFP. This added value was particularly evident in Member States with more limited administrative or financial capacity.

Overall, the evaluation suggests that future funding should place greater emphasis on simplification, strategic targeting, and flexibility in responding to crises. It should also strengthen environmental integration, improve coordination with other EU instruments, and move from an absorption-oriented logic towards a stronger performance-based approach, while continuing to support essential EU-level public goods such as marine data, control systems, and cross-border cooperation.