

Overfishing in Mediterranean and Black Sea falls to lowest level in a Decade: FAO Report

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Although fisheries sustainability in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea remains a source of concern, the percentage of overfished stocks has dropped to its lowest level in a decade, a milestone that coincides with aquaculture's rapid expansion as a major source of aquatic foods in the region, according to a report released by FAO's General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).

The 2025 State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries (SoMFi) report, produced with contributions from more than 700 regional experts, demonstrates that strong cooperation and evidence-based management are paying off. Fishing pressure has been cut by half over the past 10 years and key stocks are recovering.

At the same time, marine and brackish aquaculture now accounts for more than 45 per cent of aquatic food production, reaching 940 000 tonnes in 2023. Together, fisheries and aquaculture and their value chain produced 2.06 million tonnes of aquatic foods, generated \$21.5 billion and supported 1.17 million jobs.

"Stocks are not yet where we would like them to be, but they are beginning to recover thanks to science-driven management action and strong stakeholder engagement, while aquaculture, if done responsibly, is proving it can help meet future demand for aquatic foods," said Manuel Barange, Assistant Director-General and Director of Fisheries and Aquaculture at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). "Maintaining these efforts will be crucial to conserve ecosystems, strengthen livelihoods and ensure the region's food security through what we call a Blue Transformation."

Sustainable management delivers: fishing pressure down 50 per cent

The report, the most comprehensive to date, assesses 120 stocks across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, indicating that between 2013 and 2023, fishing mortality fell sharply while the biomass of assessed commercial species increased by 25 per cent, thanks to stronger, evidence-based fisheries management.

Progress is visible in several key commercial species. Red mullet and giant red shrimp show clear reductions in fishing mortality. Species under specific management plans show a larger than average recovery: common sole in the Adriatic has seen a 42 per cent drop in fishing mortality and a 64 per cent rise in biomass since 2019; turbot in the Black Sea has shown an 86 per cent reduction in fishing mortality and a 310 per cent increase in biomass since 2013.

However, sardine stocks have been subjected to sustained overexploitation over time and still show signs of biomass depletion. European hake, with high variability across subregions, shows modest signs of biomass recovery despite a 38 per cent decrease in fishing mortality since 2015.

While insufficient, these improvements follow a decade of accelerated action by GFCM Members, who since 2013 have adopted 11 management plans, established 11 fisheries restricted areas, and launched 18 research programmes and pilot studies to inform decision-making.

“These results build on regional commitments such as the MedFish4Ever and the Sofia Declarations, and reflect countries’ strong commitment to sustainability,” said Milena Mihaylova, Head of Unit for Fisheries Management in the Mediterranean and Black Sea at the European Commission. “But we cannot assume the work is done. Greater collaboration and continuous action are still needed to ensure long-term sustainability, also at the social and economic levels.”

Despite this progress, 52 per cent of assessed stocks in the region remain overfished. This is a major improvement from a decade ago, when 87 per cent of stocks were overfished, but still too high for a healthy marine ecosystem. Other challenges also persist, including enhancing compliance with adopted measures, an ageing workforce and unequal profitability, along with discards and incidental catches of vulnerable species, particularly in identified hot spots across the region.