

Wednesday 7 July 2021

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The impact on the fishing sector of offshore windfarms and other renewable energy systems

European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2021 on the impact on the fishing sector of offshore wind farms and other renewable energy systems (2019/2158(INI))

(2022/C 99/10)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Commission communication of 11 December 2019 entitled ‘The European Green Deal’ (COM(2019)0640),
- having regard to the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030, set out in the Commission communication of 20 May 2020 entitled ‘EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 — Bringing nature back into our lives’ (COM(2020)0380),
- having regard to the Commission recommendations of May 2020 for positive interactions between offshore wind farms and fisheries,
- having regard to the Commission’s 2020 Blue Economy Report of 11 June 2020,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 17 September 2020 entitled ‘Stepping up Europe’s 2030 climate ambition — Investing in a climate-neutral future for the benefit of our people’ (COM(2020)0562),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 19 November 2020 entitled ‘An EU Strategy to harness the potential of offshore renewable energy for a climate neutral future’ (COM(2020)0741),
- having regard to Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive) ⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to Directive 2014/89/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning ⁽²⁾ (‘Maritime Spatial Planning Directive’),
- having regard to Directive (EU) 2018/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2018 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to the Agreement adopted at the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris on 12 December 2015 (the Paris Agreement),
- having regard to its resolution of 16 January 2018 on international ocean governance: an agenda for the future of our oceans in the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to the ‘EMODnet Human Activities Vessels Density Mapping — Service, 2019’ and ‘Offshore Renewable Energy Developments — 2018’ mapping services of the OSPAR Data and Information Management System,
- having regard to the North Sea Advisory Council (NSAC) advice of 28 December 2020 on the development of offshore wind farms and fisheries interactions,
- having regard to its position adopted at first reading on 24 June 2021 with a view to the adoption of a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999 (‘European Climate Law’) ⁽⁵⁾,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 164, 25.6.2008, p. 19.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 257, 28.8.2014, p. 135.

⁽³⁾ OJ L 328, 21.12.2018, p. 82.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 458, 19.12.2018, p. 9.

⁽⁵⁾ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2021)0309.

Wednesday 7 July 2021

- having regard to the study requested by the Committee on Fisheries (PECH) of 12 November 2020 on the impact of the use of offshore wind and other marine renewables on European fisheries,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Fisheries (A9-0184/2021),
- A. whereas the EU is aiming to become climate neutral by 2050 at the latest, in line with the Green Deal objectives; whereas the Commission has proposed a greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction objective of at least 55 % by 2030, while Parliament has called for a GHG emission reduction target of 60 % by 2030; whereas offshore renewable energy is one of the options that Member States can choose to achieve this target; whereas it should play a key role in achieving these objectives through an integrated approach taking into account the three pillars of sustainability;
- B. whereas under the Treaties the EU has the responsibility to ensure security of supply and Member States are responsible for determining the structure of their energy supply and their choice of energy sources, while respecting the EU targets for climate neutrality by 2050;
- C. whereas according to the Commission's estimates, 30 % of the EU's electricity demand in 2050 will be met by offshore wind, corresponding to an increase from the current 12 GW offshore wind capacity in the EU-27 to a target of 300 GW in 2050; whereas according to the Commission's estimates demand will reach 40 GW of ocean energy capacity by 2050;
- D. whereas according to Article 194 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the Union energy policy must ensure the functioning of the energy market and security of energy supply, promote energy efficiency and savings and the development of renewable energy and promote the interconnection of energy networks; whereas the definition of the energy mix of Member States remains a national competence, and therefore energy mixes are highly diversified;
- E. whereas the Northern Seas (North Sea, Baltic Sea and North-East Atlantic) account for more than 85 % of all offshore wind capacity in EU-27 waters;
- F. whereas the geographical characteristics of Member States and European sea basins vary greatly across the EU; whereas the development of offshore wind farms (OFWs) and other renewable energy systems is currently concentrated in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, where conditions are more favourable; whereas, in the future, the possibility or desirability of creating, or of increasing the size or capacity of, offshore renewable energy installations will equally be very different in each basin and Member State;
- G. whereas it was agreed in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement that EU fishing vessels would continue to have reciprocal access to UK waters and would therefore continue to share the European marine space which currently contains 110 OFWs with more than 5 000 wind turbines;
- H. whereas the supply of wind energy can be irregular and unstable, due to changing weather circumstances;
- I. whereas the possibilities for storing wind energy are still very limited;
- J. whereas other offshore renewable energy sources such as wave, tidal and thermal technologies, floating photovoltaic installations and the use of algae to produce biofuels play an important role in the Commission's offshore renewable energy strategy, although there are currently no large-scale installations in operation; whereas they can contribute to achieving climate neutrality and enhanced European leadership, and create new jobs; whereas it is necessary to continue research and innovation, as other offshore renewable energy sources could be promising and more appropriate in some areas and have less impact on fishing activities, fish stocks and the marine environment;

Wednesday 7 July 2021

- K. whereas offshore wind turbines have an average life cycle of 25 to 30 years; whereas very few turbines have so far been decommissioned and recycling is still very complex with 85 to 90 % of a dismantled wind turbine being recycled; whereas a long-term vision based on a circular economy and life-cycle approach is necessary in order to assess the impacts on other activities, such as fishing, and on local communities and ecosystems, at the end of the project; whereas eco-design through the use of specific materials and the design of the infrastructure can foster the development of local biodiversity; whereas recycling methods or maintaining infrastructures as artificial reefs have to be assessed at an early stage of the conception of the project;
- L. whereas the most cost- and space-efficient way to achieve the 2050 offshore capacity target would be through the multiple use of the same maritime space by different sectors, by considering a co-benefit approach, according to which each activity benefits from the other, as the cohabitation of activities can be positive in terms of the environment and socio-economic benefits;
- M. whereas there is increasing competition between different uses of maritime space, which often leads to the historical uses of evident historical, cultural, social and economic value, such as fishing, being overlooked;
- N. whereas the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive states that Member States must take into consideration the interactions of activities and uses such as aquaculture, fishing, and installations and infrastructures for the production of energy from renewable sources, as well as submarine cables, promote the coexistence of relevant activities and apply an ecosystem-based approach;
- O. whereas, through their maritime spatial plans, Member States should aim to contribute to the sustainable development of energy sectors at sea, of maritime transport, of the fisheries and aquaculture sectors, and the preservation, protection and improvement of the environment, including resilience to climate change impacts; whereas, in this regard, fisheries and aquaculture interests should receive special attention and should not be marginalised as Member States continue their work and subsequent revisions of national maritime spatial plans;
- P. whereas the Commission proposal for an EU Biodiversity Strategy states that ‘The EU will prioritise solutions such as ocean energy, offshore wind, which also allows for fish stock regeneration’, while a recent study published by its Directorate-General for Internal Policies⁽⁶⁾ reveals that ‘potential fisheries benefits as a consequence of Offshore Renewables installations are not well understood and empirical evidence is pending’;
- Q. whereas the Commission, in its communication entitled ‘An EU Strategy to harness the potential of offshore renewable energy for a climate neutral future’, called on public authorities to plan the deployment of offshore renewable energies in the long term and from an early stage, assessing their environmental, social and economic sustainability, ensuring coexistence with other activities, such as fisheries and aquaculture, and making sure the public accept planned deployments;
- R. whereas fisheries have a relatively small impact on GDP; whereas it is of the utmost importance for fishing communities in many Member States;
- S. whereas around 80 % of all fishing vessels in the EU are small-scale vessels, with most being family-run businesses that go back generations, operating mainly in coastal waters;
- T. whereas the cumulation of current and future offshore renewable developments has the biggest impact on fishing operations targeting demersal species and crustaceans;
- U. whereas harnessing offshore energy, while ensuring environmental protection and the sustainable development of fisheries and other economic activities, requires joint planning and a rigorous assessment of cumulative impacts, including socio-economic effects;

⁽⁶⁾ Study — ‘Impact of the use of offshore wind and other marine renewables on European fisheries’, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department B — Structural and Cohesion Policies, 12 November 2020.

Wednesday 7 July 2021

- V. whereas additional research into the effects of OFWs and other offshore renewable energy systems on the marine environment and fisheries resources is needed;
- W. whereas Parliament insists that the Union's 2030 target for the climate must be an economy-wide GHG emission reduction of 60 % compared to 1990;
- X. whereas exploring EU offshore wind resources and promoting marine renewable energy projects in a manner compatible with other uses of the maritime space, primarily fisheries, while seeking synergies and protecting biodiversity is a necessity;
- Y. whereas the monitoring and empirical analysis of fishing practices before, during and after the construction of OWFs is important to create a better understanding of co-existence;
- Z. whereas the foundations of offshore renewable energy devices might attract marine life and could have an artificial reef effect;
- AA. whereas the International Hydrographic Organisation (IHO) recommends avoiding fishing activities at a minimum distance of 0,25 nautical miles (463 meters) on either side of a submarine cable to minimise risks;
1. Highlights the need to avoid the potential negative long-term impact caused by offshore wind turbines on certain ecosystems, fish stocks and biodiversity, and consequently on fisheries as a whole; emphasises the need for a life-cycle approach to their development, from construction through operation and decommissioning, hence the importance of rigorous and detailed studies to assess the impacts of existing offshore wind turbines;
 2. Emphasises that offshore renewable energy should be deployed in such a way as to create opportunities for other activities, through an environmental, social and economic co-benefits approach, ensuring benefits for fishers and local communities;
 3. Warns that offshore renewable energy will only be sustainable if it has no negative impact on the environment and on economic, social and territorial cohesion, especially in fisheries-dependent regions;
 4. Is concerned about the lack of research into the decommissioning of offshore wind turbines and into the effects of decommissioning on the environment;
 5. Reaffirms that it remains the competence of a Member State to decide on its national energy mix and technologies;
 6. Emphasises that renewable energy and energy efficiency are among the key drivers for reaching a net zero-emissions economy; highlights that in order to meet the 2030 renewable energy target, offshore renewable electricity infrastructure capacity and production need to be increased accordingly;
 7. Highlights the important potential of renewable hydrogen, including from wind and solar energy, in reaching the Union's climate neutrality objective;
 8. Stresses that floating wind farms have the potential to be developed in deep water areas, which expands the viable zone for wind energy development while reducing its visibility from shore; calls, therefore, on the Commission and the Member States to support the upscaling and commercialisation of sustainable floating offshore wind technology that further reduces the impact on fisheries;
 9. Stresses the need to minimise the risk of the large-scale roll-out of OWFs affecting the physical functioning of the sea basin, in particular sea and air currents, which might contribute to a mixing of the stratified water column and consequently influence the nutrient cycle, wave generation, tidal amplitudes and bedload sediment transport, and that the effects of these must be closely monitored, while infrasonic noise from rotating blades could repel fish, as well as marine mammal species, from OWFs, and electromagnetic fields from underwater cables, as well as underwater noise from pile driving, could have severe negative impacts on crustaceans and marine life; stresses in this regard the need for further development and research into how to avoid and mitigate these negative effects;

Wednesday 7 July 2021

10. Notes the importance of implementing best practices in terms of minimising disruption and mitigating damage to ecosystems in the planning, operational and decommissioning stages of offshore activity;
11. Takes the view that the installation of marine renewable energy production units must be incorporated into and respond to the development strategies and energy sovereignty of each state while being consistent with the objectives of the European Green Deal;
12. Highlights the importance of taking the morphological and geographical characteristics of the areas in which OWFs are to be established into account;
13. Takes the view that decisions to install offshore renewable energy production infrastructure should be based on the best scientific assessments of the associated impacts and involve all stakeholders in the exploitation of the areas to be occupied, in particular the associated fishing communities and their organisations;
14. Stresses the need to investigate the potential effects, such as artificial reef effects of offshore renewable systems, on marine life and fisheries, which could be limited to the operational phase and to examine how decommissioning can be carried out in such a way that its benefits might not be temporary; underlines that when OWFs are decommissioned, the sites need to be left in a state that allows fishing activities if they had been allowed before construction or during the operational phase, and that protects and respects the environment;
15. Points out the need to consider the characteristics of the seabed when deploying OWFs so as not to build infrastructure where it would risk altering the local habitat and ecosystem;
16. Proposes to assess the combination and integration of OWFs within marine protected areas (MPAs) against clearly defined habitat and biodiversity conservation objectives, including those pertaining to fisheries resources; underlines that management committees should be set up in these MPAs in order to achieve better coexistence of activities, and that approval by the relevant competent authority in charge of the MPAs must be given;
17. Stresses that OWFs should, whenever possible, be placed in zones where fishing is not permitted, in order to minimise negative impacts on the fishing industry;
18. States that OWFs can have an impact on fisheries by changing the spatial distribution and abundance of commercially fished marine species as well as through their closure for safety reasons or the imposition of a change in fishing activity or method, for example from active to passive;
19. Insists on the establishment of dialogue and cooperation with fishers at an early stage in the process; emphasises the need to take into account local ecosystems and the specificities of the local community; highlights the need for proper compensation for fishers if the establishment of OWFs affects their activities;
20. Takes note of the fact that the Commission communication on the biodiversity strategy for 2030 states that 'The EU will prioritise solutions such as ocean energy, offshore wind, which also allows for fish stock regeneration', and that the possibility of a combination of OWFs and protected areas is considered;
21. Stresses that the environmental, social and economic impact of OWFs depends on site-specific conditions, ecosystems and human activities, and that stakeholder collaboration in the design, implementation and management of OWFs is key to resolving issues of common interest;
22. Notes that the small-scale, coastal and artisanal fishing sector may bear the brunt of the impact of the installation of these offshore renewable energy production units, given their relative proximity to the coast;
23. Stresses that small-scale and coastal fishers will be particularly affected if displacement takes place, as they may not have the capacity to move to fishing grounds further afield or to change fishing method, particularly if OWFs are located in territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the coast); calls for appropriate compensation as a last resort;

Wednesday 7 July 2021

24. Stresses the need to facilitate access to insurance for fishing vessels operating in or sailing through areas with OWFs, as it is currently very problematic owing to the insufficient indemnity levels offered by fishing vessels' insurance policies;
25. Points out that any restriction on access to traditional fishing grounds directly affects the livelihoods of fishers from the different coastal EU Member States and dependent jobs ashore; stresses, therefore, that appropriate compensation should be given as a last resort when necessary; furthermore, points out that restrictions on access could undermine the responsible and sustainable provision of food security;
26. Calls on Member States, in line with maritime spatial planning provisions, to designate specific historical and traditional fishing grounds of local fishers as areas that are to remain free of offshore renewables;
27. Stresses that overlap analysis of offshore renewables and fisheries suggests a sharp increase in spatial conflict potential in certain European sea basins over the coming years; stresses, in this context, the need for early spatial planning which includes all relevant stakeholders, with regard to both the placement and the lay-out of OFWs; calls for effective participation, dialogues and networks to be set up at an early stage, in order to reduce and avoid conflicts;
28. Stresses that there are currently some examples of cooperation of (active or passive) fishing activities in areas with OFWs; stresses that cooperative co-design approaches to the deployment of OWFs, in order to combine them with other uses, can reduce the potential impact on fisheries, strengthen the relationship between the various sectors involved and allow for beneficial cooperation between them;
29. Recognises the potential for aqua- and algaculture, as well as for passive fishing, within areas with OWFs; stresses, however, that more research is necessary in order to assess their ecological impact and economic potential;
30. Is concerned about the fact that, apart from prohibitions and restrictions to fishing activities, fishers tend to avoid fishing in areas with OWFs even if access is permitted because of the risk of accidental damage, snagging and loss of fishing gear, and that consequently the fear of potential exposure to liability is a source of concern that hinders coexistence;
31. Stresses that outermost regions' and islands' energy mixes are highly dependent on fossil fuel imports, despite their local characteristics which are conducive to the development of renewables; calls, therefore, on the Commission and the Member States to pay special attention and dedicate specific funding to the development of offshore renewable energy in these territories in order to minimise dependency on fossil fuels;
32. Acknowledges the potential of floating offshore wind devices which create opportunities for installations in areas with deep waters, and involve greater distance from the coastline, less visual impact and less potential spatial overlap with fishing areas;
33. Stresses that the decommissioning of offshore wind turbines must neither generate enduring environmental impacts or pose safety risks to fishing vessels due to any remaining sub-seabed infrastructure; points out, in addition, that recycling methods should be further developed in order to reduce the impacts on the environment; considers it essential to ensure that offshore windfarms should only be built if an integrated approach to the life-cycle processes of offshore wind turbines is taken, meaning that it is clear from the beginning how offshore wind turbines can be designed, constructed, used, decommissioned and recycled in a sustainable way; stresses further that decommissioning strategies envisaging alternative future use or removal of the constructions must be integrated into the design and installation plans from the beginning, and that the long-term sustainable impact must be considered in order to adhere to the principles of a circular economy;
34. Urges the creation of an international standard that defines how to decommission turbines and that gives a comprehensive overview of the rules and regulations on decommissioning, while adhering to the principles of a circular economy;

Wednesday 7 July 2021

35. Emphasises that financial arrangements should be put in place in order to cover the long-term risks arising from abandoned offshore infrastructure which might be removed so that fishing may safely return;
36. Stresses that any sub-seabed infrastructure left in situ should be subject to appropriate monitoring;
37. Highlights that assessments of the economic, socio-economic and socio-cultural effects of offshore renewables on fisheries are lacking in recent empirical studies; urges the Commission, therefore, to carry out further research in addition to studying the environmental impacts in order to assess the possible economic and social impacts on fisheries of investments in offshore renewables and to identify appropriate ways to overcome these negative impacts;
38. Stresses that standardised monitoring programmes and harmonisation of fishing effort data are required to enable cumulative ecological and socio-economic as well as environmental impact assessment of the expansion of offshore renewable energy and that compatibility and comparability of data have to be improved;
39. Proposes that Member States increase coordination in the field of OWF research in order to facilitate the collection and exchange of research findings and data, as well as exchange of best practices; recalls that offshore wind energy is one of the most advanced technologies, but that other renewable energy systems could be promising, and in certain cases more appropriate, in some areas where fishing activities take place and thus have a less damaging impact on the economic, social and environmental aspects; highlights the importance of boosting investments in research and development in this regard;
40. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to improve cross-border cooperation in maritime spatial planning, including with the United Kingdom, the largest producer of offshore wind in Europe, in order to find solutions to common problems, integrate electricity connections and learn from best practices;
41. States that maritime spatial planning must play a key role, by distinguishing each maritime area on the basis of its own characteristics and has to put greater emphasis on the assessment of achieving co-location options and multi-usage of OFWs, which is of the utmost importance in achieving a win-win situation for sustainable fisheries, aquaculture and the offshore energy sector, and in including the effective participation of fisheries in the decision-making process as opposed to the overly vague notions of 'consultation' and 'observers', the fulfilment of commitments made and the prior resolution of usage conflicts;
42. Calls on Member States, as the competent authority on maritime spatial planning, in the context of their continued work and subsequent revisions of national maritime spatial plans, to take into account the need to ensure that the negative effects of offshore wind turbines on fisheries are avoided and that they are therefore placed away from fishing grounds;
43. Promotes the application of an ecosystem-based approach in maritime spatial planning, with the intention of providing a systems-based framework for understanding and managing marine ecosystems and their interaction with socio-economic activities;
44. Highlights the importance of community energy production schemes which allow coastal communities and cooperatives, including fishers, to generate their own electricity and reinvest profits back into the community;
45. Stresses that OWFs should only be built if the exclusion of negative environmental and ecological, as well as economic, socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts on fishers and aquaculture producers is guaranteed, in line with the objectives of the Blue Economy and the European Green Deal;
46. Urges the Member States to take into account the impact of offshore renewable energy on the marine ecosystem and fisheries when determining their energy mix;
47. Urges the Member States also to continue working on the development and usage of other forms of renewable energy;

Wednesday 7 July 2021

48. Calls on the Commission to carry out an impact assessment to examine the expected economic, social and environmental consequences of constructing OWF facilities where they are likely to come into conflict with both the fishing sector and the sustainability of marine life;
 49. Stresses that cooperation across the sectors active in the offshore environment and economy will also be a driver for a just transition; calls on the Commission to assess initiatives that stimulate local economies and economic activities offshore and to find synergies between sectors that can serve as a basis for a future-proof economic recovery;
 50. Highlights that examples of coexistence between the fishing sector and the offshore wind energy sector already exist, and that this experience should be used to find and share the best available practices for the whole life cycle of marine infrastructure;
 51. Stresses that stakeholders should have a right to participate and have a say in maritime spatial planning;
 52. Stresses that early, equitable, effective and continuous stakeholder consultation and participation, notably of fishers and aquaculture producers, the creation of transparent guidelines and the payment of compensation could alleviate the potential for conflict and create a level playing field between fisheries and offshore renewables;
 53. Calls for the EU to promote and support OWF in its external action, in particular with third countries where access to energy remains uneven and limited, in line with the Green Deal's objectives;
 54. Emphasises that the precautionary principle, in accordance with Article 191(2) TFEU, should apply if decisions have to be taken before the required knowledge or information is available;
 55. Notes that further measures at EU level might be required, including legislation, given that evidence suggests that Member States' maritime spatial planning does not guarantee the fair inclusion of fishers and other stakeholders and, where appropriate, compensation for fisheries;
 56. Urges the Commission and the Member States to ensure that maritime spatial plans guarantee the fair inclusion of fisheries, the sustainable continuation of their activities and fairly reflect the legitimate interests of fishers, shellfish gatherers and aquaculturists;
 57. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.
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