NAFMC Overview Speech

Ministers, excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour for me to be given the task of delivering this overview speech at your annual meeting today and thus once again be given the opportunity to attend the very important North-Atlantic Fisheries Ministers Conference. I appreciate that very much.

The task at hand is to discuss **“The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Fisheries Sector and Seafood Markets”**. These effects can be classified into many and sometimes quite different categories. They therefore need to be treated and reacted to in different ways. Some of them are general but others are sector specific and even in addition localised. Luckily, many of them are and will be transient and will go away as we reach the new normal after the Pandemic. Also, some can be reacted to without major problems or in a general way as we deal with other problems outside of the sector. However, some of them may persist and not only that can even exacerbate problems that were present in the sector and unresolved before the Pandemic hit us. These are the ones that we need to identify and be prepared to deal with as soon as possible. Even starting before the Pandemic is official declared over or the infection otherwise brought under control.

On the production side, including fisheries operations and processing, as well as on the marketing side there have been major disruptions and changes. They have however not been such that one can say that consumers are turning away from fish. Mostly they have revolved around changed form or location of consumption. Consumers have turned away from restaurants and tourism related consumption to retail and consume at home forms of products instead. The demand has been and still is there. Logistics have had a major role to play in response to these changes, as have those that service processing factories for retail markets. Judging by how the industry and those servicing the sector have responded to the Pandemic I would except them to be able to revert back to the earlier situation or a situation that mixes the new and the old relatively easily. Along the way possibly making use of new marketing opportunities.

There are however questions that will remain. The first one would be about the financial situation of the companies as they come out of the Pandemic. Some of them might have had to incur costs to respond to the situation, they may have had less income but still needed to cover the fixed costs of the companies. This may apply specially to smaller operators supplying local markets even local tourist markets. They might have needed to close down completely and face difficulties in starting up again and therefore not be able to make use of the returning opportunities. There will likely be general interventions that the bigger ones can make use of but not necessarily all the small ones. However, they should not be forgotten since they are often the weakest amongst us.

One very important issue in all of this is the public health issue. We all know fairly accurately where the virus causing the disease comes from. We also know fairly accurately what the prevailing circumstances are where things like this happen. We also know that it is not a new problem. Therefore inevitable this will be a cause for even greater vigilance in hygiene matters in general and may even affect the best of places. Nobody can afford to be under suspicion in matters like hygiene and even if wet markets will not be outlawed, they need to be subject to much stricter controls and surveillance than we have seen before.

I said earlier that the logistics side of fish trade had responded very well to changing circumstances during the Pandemic. However, during the Pandemic the discussion about the carbon footprint of food transportation has been growing louder. I am certain that this will have a lasting effect on the sector. Not only regarding how you transport food but also regarding where you produce your food. Of course, in the capture sector you catch the fish where it is and even chase it all over to finally catch it in the fullness of time. Aquaculture however is different. There you have a choice of location and culture technologies and methods. They are not all equal in the cost of rearing the fish but the markets could possibly come to accept more costly products, if they have a lower carbon footprint. Moreover, this discussion might even be a driver in increasing the speed of technical advancement of for instance land-based farming of Atlantic salmon. Advancement towards less expensive technologies with lower carbon emissions both from the production point of view as well as from the transport point of view, due to locations closer to the market. This is something we might face in not such a distant future.

One of the most serious effects of the Pandemic are the negative effects on monitoring, control and surveillance activities. Thus undermining both the national management of fish stocks but also international fish stock management. Both of which rely heavily on continuity, comparability and standardisation in their operations. Lockdowns have a general negative effect on activities since these activities are difficult to do from home or under conditions when circumstances lead to under-manning in the crucial central control locations, either through staff staying at home or through illnesses. Most RFMOs have reported disruptions and lapses in both compliance activities and "at sea" observations programmes. Thus undermining the global fight against IUU. What also needs to born in mind here is that all RFMOs are not equal and that the ocean areas with weaker RFMO activity are likely to suffer more than for instance the areas controlled by the North-Atlantic RFMOs.

International fisheries management is suffering in other ways than just disrupted or absent MCS activities. Even if digital technologies and the various teleconferencing possibilities have been brought to good use during the Pandemic. Meeting through your computer screen does not always have the same effects as meeting face to face. What it is that makes the difference is difficult to say. Perhaps it is different from one person to another but there are also collective differences that have been noticed. The fact seems to be that it is more difficult to reach an agreement in negotiations over the internet , particularly on a consensus basis, than in a face to face meeting. This is of course very important in RFMOs that rely on annual negotiations to determine catch quotas as well as in bilateral negotiations of the same nature. Not that this isn't difficult enough under normal circumstances. This is obviously psychological and will possibly change with time and training since some of these agreements are an absolute must for things to function internationally. But the fact is that the peer pressure, camaraderie and the feeling of working together for the common good that you feel when you are all together in one place. Does not translate well through the internet and is replaced by peer pressure at home, to not give in under any circumstances. I think this is something that is very worthwhile for you as ministers to ponder over.

In the Global context “The Great Divide”, or in other words the Socio-Economic differences between those countries that enjoyed the fruits of the Industrial Revolution and those that have not yet done so, has been very evident. It has been predicted that the number of those suffering from hunger internationally will increase by over 100 million people due to the Pandemic. Countries that export most of their agricultural commodities and import most of their processed or semi-processed foods have been in a precarious situation. Particularly during the periods when international shipping was under threat. However, with in the Fisheries and Seafood sector we have our own “Great Divide” which is likely to deepen during this crisis. Here I am talking about the difference in fisheries management capacity between the North and the South. In general, but with exceptions, stock situations are better in the North than in the South, which corresponds roughly with the effectiveness and strength of the RFMOs in these areas. The five tuna RFMOs are a somewhat special case in many ways, and fall into a category in between the two other groups. Even though most stocks are inside national waters and managed nationally the presence of an RFMO in the region has a huge effect on how successful the general management is in the region. The difference between the two groups in North and South is the amount of financial support they get from their member countries for their scientific and statistical work on stock status, as well as for policy-making, decision-making and implementation. This then trickles down through joint training, various workshops, capacity building in country and cooperation to change the whole picture in the region. It seems evident from the reports of the RFMOs that they are taking a hit from this Pandemic and a situation that is at the present not good may turn to a bad one if nothing is done. It has been clear for a while that the countries in the South will not be able to operate their RFMOs properly without financial support from the World Community. It therefore seems timely to rectify what we forgot when we through UNCLOS and the Fish Stocks agreement set up a very good RFMO system to finally set up alongside it a financial mechanism that allows it to operate at its intended capacity. Otherwise, a reputational risk can return to haunt us in the sector as we move forward and pick up speed after the Pandemic.

I mentioned earlier that we know fairly accurately where the SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19, comes from and how it came to be. After all its appearance, or something like it, has been predicted and a number of its forerunners have been dealt with over the past decade or two. The deeper background to their appearance is however less discussed. This is man's relentless encroachment on nature. Resulting in ever more land being taken for our use and during the process humans coming into contact with more and more exotic wild animals, their habitats and their microorganisms. The outcome being that 70 percent of human diseases have an animal origin. This is only one combined reflection of the situation of the dryland part of our globe, the soil situation, the water status and the biodiversity issues in general being others worth mentioning. Both as components and stand alone effects. All this is due to how we use the Globe disproportionally to capture the live giving sunlight for primary production. Two thirds of the Globe, the ocean and waterways, are only used to produce a fraction of what we produce on land. It stands to reason, that as we discover evermore limitations to what we can do on land, COVID being the latest one, we should set our sights on the blue ocean and think about Blue Growth. The living renewable, and therefore sustainable, part of the Blue Economy!

I am not going to go into Blue Growth at length or in detail here today. Since you have experts at hand in your ministries and institution that know more about it than I do, particularly the local possibilities and their local details. However, I would emphasize again the need to capture sunlight for primary production using a larger share of the Global surface than we do now as well as to point out how large a share of the sourcing that goes into aquaculture comes from land. The vast majority of the resources sourced for aquaculture feed comes from land. Considering the abundance of plankton, seaweed and seagrasses around I am sure that with ingenuity, a little monetary encouragement and the right policies we could make considerable changes in these proportions in favour of marine ingredients in a relatively short time. Here I am talking about sourcing beyond just fishmeal and fish oil. Admittedly land-based agriculture has about a 10.000 year head start but with modern breeding techniques, genetic mapping and marking technologies etc. to help us. I am sure the oceanic counterparts of cereals and pulses could gain ground quite quickly. In this regard, it is worthwhile remembering the story of the hare and the turtle. Possibly, we could one day have aquaculture that is completely sourced from marine ingredients!

As I mentioned earlier the situation with regards to stock status is much better in the North than in in South. There are however issues here in the North-Atlantic which need to be resolved for us to be able to move forward comfortable in the believe that we are both doing things in a sustainable way and democratically. These issues relate in fact both to capture fisheries and aquaculture. In the fastest growing part of the food sector, aquaculture, there is unfortunately still discord, suspicion and disagreement. However, in this part of the sector the possibilities for growth, Blue Growth, resides! That does not mean that every idea put forward is safe and should be implemented. It however means that reasonable ideas should get fair scrutiny without prejudice and decisions should be taken based on the best available science and precaution. Everybody needs to accept and recognise this approach and agreement on this bases needs to be sought through discussion, information sharing and transparency. This is the route post – COVID to success in aquaculture and Blue Growth.

Ministers, Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

I cannot miss this opportunity to mention to you one final issue, since I just recently made it a point of emphasis at a meeting organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers. That is the issue of the mackerel and in general the North-Atlantic Pelagic complex. I know it is difficult and that it has been unresolved for a long time. The problem was even there when I was Fisheries Minister in Iceland some 20 years ago. However, we are the most advanced democracies in the World. Surely, it cannot be beyond us to solve an issue like this. That would set a good example to the rest of the World and further enhance your reputation as World leaders in fisheries management, aquaculture, Blue Growth and the response to COVID-19.