

EU trilogue agrees to enforce full pulse fishing ban from July 2021

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The European trilogue (EU Parliament, Council and Commission) has formally agreed to implement a full ban on the controversial fishing technique known as pulse trawling, to be enforced from the start of July 2021 onwards.

The ban was agreed in Strasbourg on Feb. 13, and will apply to all waters, including those outside of the EU.

The news comes 13 months since the European Parliament [first voted to enforce a ban on pulse fishing on Jan. 16, 2018](#).

The practice of pulse fishing involves using electrodes to generate an electric current on the seafloor, inducing a cramp response from flatfish such as plaice or sole, and leaving them unable to escape the trawl nets as they pass by. Developers of the method noted the reduced fuel consumption and by-catch it generates relative to older, less efficient beam trawling.

However, the practice has also been widely criticized by various European organizations, who claim that it is inhumane and that its efficiency reduces whole areas of the seafloor to a desert, while the effect of the electrical current on juveniles and fish eggs is also poorly understood.

The Dutch fishing fleet had been granted derogations allowing it to equip 5% of its fleet with pulse trawls, ostensibly for research purposes. However, the method came under scrutiny in 2017 when it became clear that 84 vessels, or 30% of the Dutch fleet, were now using the technique.

Following this most recent announcement, the Dutch may return to the use of pulse gear on 5% of their vessels (up to six) until the full ban comes into force on June 30, 2021. No further exemptions will be granted, and all remaining pulse trawlers must follow a protocol validated by the European Commission's scientific body.

News of the pulse fishing ban has been celebrated by one of its strongest advocates, the French environmental NGO Bloom.

"It's been a long winding road to get here," said Claire Nouvian, founder of Bloom. "We have managed to completely turn the political ecosystem in our favor. The negotiations tonight almost only focused on the date of the ban, nobody was even questioning the fact that the prohibition would occur".

Bloom's sole concern with the decision was the introduction of a two-year transition period before the ban comes into full force, during which time it believes the practice can still do significant damage to smaller, artisanal fishing businesses.

"A two-year transition period from today is far too long for small-scale fishers," said Sabine Rosset, director of Bloom. "They have been suffering from unfair competition from industrial vessels fishing illegally for years. In the meantime, member states must immediately prohibit electric fishing in their own waters so that Dutch vessels can no longer fish along our coasts."

Frederic Le Manach, scientific director at Bloom, was also critical that the European college of commissioners had opted not to prosecute the Netherlands for its use of pulse licenses that the Commission has purportedly acknowledged as illegal.

"This is unacceptable -- we demand a public explanation from Jean-Claude Juncker about whether or not the College of Commissioners has blocked the request by the Directorate-General of Fisheries (DGMARE) to initiate proceedings against the Netherlands," the scientific director said. "Furthermore, the millions of euros collected under illegal licenses must be returned to European taxpayers."

The decision to ban pulse fishing from July 2021 will still need to be endorsed by the EU Parliament during a plenary vote, which Bloom said will be a "mandatory but risk-free step."