



Mr. Virginijus Sinkevičius

European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

Cc : Carmen Preising, Deputy Head of Cabinet  
Maja Kirchner, Head of Unit, DG-Mare (MARE.C.1)  
Silvia Bartolini, Head of Unit, DG-ENV (ENV.C.2)

21 September 2021

**Subject: Crucial upcoming opportunity for the EU to deliver sound protection for seamounts, other Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems and deep-sea biodiversity in EU waters.**

Dear Commissioner,

The forthcoming months present the EU with a crucial opportunity to act and protect Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME) of the deep sea, including seamounts considered amongst the world's greatest biological treasures.

Our organizations are among the broad group of European-based organizations that followed with great interest the adoption of the EU's deep-sea fisheries Regulation in 2016 ((EU) 2016/2336). Among the crucial provisions of the Regulation, we were particularly encouraged with the implementation into EU law of provisions requiring the protection of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs) based on international political commitments adopted by the UN General Assembly.

Although the recent evaluation of the Regulation concluded it is fit for purpose, it nonetheless highlighted the lack of progress, now three years overdue, in closing areas to bottom fishing to protect deep-sea corals and other vulnerable marine species and ecosystems where they are known or likely to occur in EU waters.

In January this year, ICES published its [advice](#) as required under the Regulation, containing a list of areas where VMEs are known or are likely to occur within EU waters and advice on the "existing" deep-sea fishing areas. This advice contains a number of options, some affording much less protection than others. Of the four options put

forward by ICES, in our view a combination of Scenario 1/Option 2 and Scenario 2/Option 1 - or differently put, Scenario 2/Option 1 + “VME elements” - provides the best approach for the protection of VMEs, including seamounts, as required under the Regulation.

The “VME elements” – a term taken from the UN FAO International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-Sea Fisheries in the High Seas endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2009 - refer to several seamounts in EU waters categorized as a type of deep-sea feature internationally recognized as likely to contain deep-sea corals, sponges and other deep-sea habitat forming species which support biologically rich and diverse ecosystems. Regarded as hotspots of marine biodiversity, seamounts’ biodiversity and ecosystems are recognized as vulnerable to significant adverse impacts from deep-sea bottom fishing, primarily deep-sea bottom trawling.

As recognized in the UN’s First World Ocean Assessment: *“The documented widespread extent of deep-water trawl fisheries has led to pervasive concern for the conservation of fragile benthic habitats...The extent of benthic impacts has been described for local fishing grounds but has not been assessed globally; however, if the impacts of these regional studies are generalized, we can extrapolate that fishing, and in particular deep-water trawling, has caused severe, widespread, long-term destruction of these environments globally.”*<sup>1</sup>

In the coming months, the European Commission is expected to publish its draft Implementing Act for consideration and endorsement by EU Member States. **As such, we respectfully urge you to support and promote the most ambitious option for the protection of deep-sea ecosystems in EU waters: Scenario 2/Option 1 + VME elements.**

President Ursula von der Leyen and the Heads of State of all EU Member States signed the [Leaders Pledge for Nature](#) to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Moreover, the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#) kicks off this year, further reinforcing the commitments made by the EU to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems from the impact of destructive deep-sea bottom trawling and allowing degraded ecosystems an opportunity to recover.

Implementing precautionary area closures to protect deep-sea VMEs, including seamounts, represents a perfect opportunity for the EU to take a significant step forward in putting words into action and protecting areas of high biodiversity value in our oceans.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and relevant experts of your cabinet, whether virtually or in person, to discuss further these important matters. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



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*On Behalf of BirdWatch Ireland, Bloom, ClientEarth, Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, Ecologistas en Acción, Nederlandse Elasmobranchen Vereniging, Oceana, OceanCare, Our Fish, Sciaena, Seas At Risk, The Nature Conservancy, Whale and Dolphin Conservation and World Wide Fund for Nature*

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 51, Biological communities on seamounts and other submarine features potentially threatened by disturbance (pages 15-17)