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Seafood DIRECTORY

EU countries flouting transparency laws on subsidies, report claims

Ewen Cook

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Fisheries subsidy watchdog FishSubsidy.org is sniffing at the EU's money trail again -- and it stinks, according to the group's new report.



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"Slipping through the net: How EU countries evade new budget transparency rules" names and shames Member States for failing to report accurately on subsidies recipients and undermining transparency laws designed to make the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) more accountable.

According to report author Brigitte Alfter, the European Transparency Initiative (ETI), launched in 2005, gave EU countries the responsibility of publishing the names of beneficiaries and the amounts of EU funding allocated after May 1, 2007.

However, "weakness" in the legal framework for transparency and "bureaucratic obfuscation" by Member States have actually made it even harder for EU citizens to know how their money is being spent.

"With the introduction of the ETI, the cumbersome process of making access to documents requests relating to EU funds paid under the CFP should have become unnecessary. Citizens, journalists, political parties and public-interest groups should have direct access to the information," the report said.

However, instead, when compared to previous data sets that have been published, the ETI "has resulted in a single (giant) step forward but twelve steps back."

"The publication of names of beneficiaries represents real progress in budget transparency but this has been accompanied by a reduction in the quality and detail of data and its fragmentation into dozens of often inaccessible sources."

FishSubsidy.org assessed the publication of data by member states according to three criteria :

- Does it comply with the legal requirements of the ETI?
- How accessible is the data?
- Is additional information provided that goes beyond what is required by the ETI?

In the final rankings for data disclosure performance, Denmark, Finland and Estonia came out on top, scoring 55, 49 and 46 respectively. The United Kingdom was placed deep in the bottom half, scoring only 30, while Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Portugal all scored below zero.

"Taxpayers want to know their money is going towards supporting a sustainable fishing industry, this study shows that unfortunately not all Member States want to reveal how they are working to realize this," Markus Knigge, research director of the Pew Environment Group's European Marine Program, told IntraFish.

"People want to know that Member States are not using public funds to support the depletion of valuable fish stocks."

The report calls for the relevant regulations governing disclosure of data to be fully updated. It recommends that data is published at one central website, with the European Commission bearing the responsibility for co-ordination while Member States remain responsible for the accuracy of the data.

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"All of the information should be published in a consistent and user-friendly format, such as with an html search function and the option to download entire data sets in a spreadsheet or csv format.

"Finally, the largest possible range of data fields should be published, at the very minimum maintaining the detail of data disclosed under previous access to documents requests before the ETI came into force."

FishSubsidy.org is coordinated by EU Transparency -- a non-profit organization based in the United Kingdom -- and the Pew Charitable Trusts, an NGO based in the United States.

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