



Multi-annual National Strategic Plans for the development of sustainable Aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030

Summary BELGIUM

“Belgian Strategic Plan Aquaculture 2021-2030”

1. State of the aquaculture sector

The Walloon aquaculture sector has a large majority of semi-intensive, or even extensive, production sites, mainly rearing salmonids in ponds fed by a diversion of a watercourse. Walloon aquaculture is mainly centred on trout farming, with a small share for sturgeon farming for caviar production and an even smaller share for cyprinid farming. To complete the picture, we should mention the existence of micro aquaculture sectors (which involve insignificant volumes and employment): plant production (microalgae, aquatic plants ornamental plants) and crustaceans (red-legged crayfish). In Wallonia, several more intensive or even industrial farms with more modern technology have been set up. The Flemish aquaculture products are ‘Omegabaars’ (Australian tiger bass), pike perch (spotfish), gamba and caviar. These producers are all active in land-based aquaculture and use Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS). In addition to Flemish fish farming, micro-algae are grown on land for processing in aquaculture feed. There is also the limited commercial cultivation of oysters, in particular the flat oyster (*ostrea edulis*) and the hollow oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*) in the coastal zone (Spuikom Oostende). The Belgium production volumes in 2020 was 209 tonnes and the value 1,4 M€.

2. Objectives for 2021 to 2027

Flanders region:

- Encourage the development of the sector and aquaculture entrepreneurship.
- Optimize innovative, sustainable and integrated production methods.

- Identify and address (judicial) bottlenecks.

Wallonia region:

- To perpetuate Walloon artisanal aquaculture production.
- Encourage the development of the sector and aquaculture entrepreneurship.

Growth targets

Also in view of the evolution of the production volume of the Belgian aquaculture sector up to 2018, the growth target for 2030 will be set at an ambitious but realistic volume of 425 tonnes. Compared to the 2018 production, this gives a total production target of 535 tonnes/year.

3. Objectives for Measures for 2021 to 2027 responding to the 13 key areas listed in the “Strategic Guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030”¹

1. Access to space and water

Wallonia region propose the identification of areas particularly suitable for new industrial aquaculture operations, due to accessible resources, existing infrastructures, lower environmental risks and therefore potential ease of permitting. A pivotal issue in urbanised Flanders is both the availability of suitable space and access to quality water. However, there is potential for circular aquaculture in Flanders, and integration with other activities offers important benefits in terms of both environmental, economic and social sustainability. Furthermore, the ‘Internet of Water Flanders’ project provides an overview of the water quality in Flanders at a finely meshed level, which offers economic opportunities. Marine Spatial Plan (MRP) for the Belgian Part of the North Sea (BNZ), the cycle of which was renewed for the period 2020-2026 with additional opportunities for mariculture. The MRP aims to promote the development of sustainable aquaculture in the BNZ. Projects combining environmental objectives, food production and (existing) renewable energy production are therefore authorised. Finally, recent studies and initiatives undertaken show that there is a place for aquaculture in Wallonia, Flanders and in the BNZ, despite limited space. In order to incentivise producers, both investment projects and innovative research related to the search for synergies and multiple use of space will receive financial support.

¹ COM(2021)236 final

2. Regulatory and administrative procedures

- *Wallonia region*: The application process has been simplified and accelerated through an electronic online form. Proposing the granting of permits in relation to the actual production of the farm rather than the maximum possible. Revision of existing legislation on certification of organic production to set maximum certification fees.
- *Flanders and the BNZ*: Since 2018, the procedure has been simplified by merging the construction permit and the environmental permit into a single environmental permit, which is applied for through an online Environmental One-Stop-Shop. No significant changes in administrative procedures are foreseen but given the limited number of applications to start aquaculture in Flanders and the specific products placed on the market, Flanders will opt for a tailor-made approach to accompany potential entrepreneurs.

3. Animal health and public health

Financial support for research and innovation and financial support for investments going beyond what is legally required. For example, innovative prevention and control programmes and technologies or the development of practical guides can support producers and promote the health, welfare and quality of humans and animals.

4. Climate change adaptation and mitigation

Investments and innovative research projects under this framework will be eligible for support to the extent that they contribute to maintaining or increasing aquaculture production. Specifically for the Walloon context, the above-mentioned financial support will focus on modernising and implementing technological tools to reduce dependency on soil and climate conditions (e.g., through partial recirculation or cooling of water) or to switch to other and less sensitive species that are more resilient to climate change. The more artisanal production methods remain highly dependent on external events. Public aid can be provided from Wallonia, outside European funding, as compensation under certain conditions.

5. Producer and market organisation

Flanders wishes to further support the functioning of the Flemish Aquaculture Platform in order to continue to promote organisation and knowledge sharing between the various actors, including both science and industry. The necessary financial support will be provided for the setting up of the producer organisation (PO) or inter-branch organisations (BO). Similarly, it will be possible for POs in Flanders to obtain support for the preparation and implementation of production and marketing plans. In turn, the

College of Walloon Producers (SOCOPRO) will be able to benefit from a framework agreement based exclusively on Walloon resources.

6. Control

Producers will be supported to promote traceability and information for final consumers through financial support. Belgium has put in place the necessary measures to prevent fraud, ensure traceability and control of imported products and ensure that the relevant European legislation is implemented.

7. Diversification and adding value

In addition to the labelling of organic production, or potentially the designations recognised at European level, the introduction of other quality labels, which are less restrictive in terms of procedures, should be supported and highlighted. In addition to the fact that these tools contribute to improving quality and promotion, it is important to insist on the need to establish - in advance – distribution channels, without which it is difficult for consumers to access these products. The initial processing, such as smoking, which is already practised by a number of producers, also allows to increase the added value of production, and increase profit margins. Their sale on the spot and distribution is easier than in the case of fresh gutted fish.

8. Environmental performance

Recirculation systems (including aquaponics) and forms of integrated aquaculture and use of renewable energies will be supported by the funding of both additional research and innovation, as well as investment aid for the start-up and optimisation of production facilities and interventions that make the production process more sustainable (e.g., development and conversion to alternative feed of sustainable origin, which can also contribute to animal welfare and health).

9. Communicating on EU aquaculture

Financial support will be granted for measures which contribute to informing consumers about local and quality aquaculture production, in order to stimulate the marketing of these products. Such support should be considered from a collective perspective.

10. Integration in local communities

Financial support for economic feasibility studies (e.g., including consumer panels) will be provided to encourage entrepreneurs to properly identify their market outlets and to see the commercial viability of their “innovative” product.

11. Knowledge and innovation

Implementation of research and innovation that contributes to the overall objective of achieving a modern, environmentally, and economically sustainable Belgian aquaculture sector. The additional focus on fostering partnership and knowledge sharing between businesses and knowledge institutions also. Within Wallonia, the influx of young people will be equally targeted through financial support to young people to follow a specialised curriculum and financial incentives for company traineeships.

12. Data and monitoring

As provided for in Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/909, thresholds apply for the multiannual Union programme for the collection and management of data in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. Given the limited production in Belgium, therefore no social, economic, and environmental data are collected under the multiannual programme.

4. Funding

The EMFAF Programme 2021-2027 support has a clear focus on fostering entrepreneurship, networking, knowledge building and exchange, (applied) innovation and the sustainability of aquaculture enterprises, with a view to developing an economically and commercially strong production sector, considering its environment, including the (marine) environment and human and animal health and welfare.

From Flanders, financial support is also possible for related activities linked to aquaculture under a broader framework. Some of these funding initiatives include:

- Interreg: offers opportunities for topics of cross-border interest funded through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Through Interreg Vlaanderen- Nederland, managed by the provinces, important support was foreseen for several aquaculture related projects during the last programming period.
- The Blue Cluster (DBC): It is a partnership aimed at developing and promoting economic activities at sea. The central objective is to increase the competitiveness of enterprises, including by promoting cooperation on innovation and internationalisation.
- FWO: possible support for Strategic Basis Research (SBA) — including potential aquaculture related research.
- VLAIO: the Flemish Agency for Innovation and Enterprise makes various forms of grants and funding available to (start-up) companies.

From Wallonia, operators from the broad commercial fisheries sector, including aquaculture, can benefit from other Walloon support offered to all economic sectors, mainly by the SPW “Economie, Emploi et Recherche”. Also provides for public financial support for the 11 Walloon agricultural sectors, including aquaculture, which is financed exclusively from Walloon public funds. Reference is made to the Framework Agreement for the Management Board of (Walloon Aquaculture) producers (SOCOPRO).

As a result, the EMFAF is an important complementary source of support alongside the other Belgian funding channels, which should mean the shift from research and innovation towards practice-oriented applications and entrepreneurship.