European vessels have been fishing in the world’s oceans ever since the first pioneering English, French, Spanish and Portuguese fishermen crossed the Atlantic to find cod off the Canadian coast in the early sixteenth century. It is estimated that 28% of the fish caught by EU vessels for human consumption originates from waters outside the EU.

European flagged vessels have operated in foreign waters under a myriad of agreements ever since the formation of the EU. Every European flagged vessel aiming to fish outside European waters, as well as foreign vessels hoping to fish in European waters, must obtain a Fishing Authorisation under the Fisheries Authorisation Regulation (FAR).

Preliminary Results of www.whoffishesfar.org

Through an access to information request to the European Commission, Oceana and its NGO colleagues were able to publish, for the first time, how many vessels were authorised to fish outside the EU between 2010 and 2014. The vessels are named and shown where and when they were authorised to fish.

Data reveals more than 15,000 EU vessels fishing outside EU waters

The EU lends its flag to a large fleet of fishing vessels that operate outside EU waters. Until recently, the only publicly available figure on the number of EU vessels operating outside the EU was from an external study in 2008 that identified 718 vessels for the year 2007.

However, the information obtained by Oceana showed that between 2010 and 2014, 15,264 fishing vessels have operated under EU flags in external waters and that all these vessels were authorised under the EU’s FAR. The data provided by the European Commission also includes some authorisations from 2006 to 2020, amounting to 16,336 unique vessels – including 778 authorisations that were given to third (or non-EU) countries to operate in EU waters. This makes an average of 3,052 vessels per year – 2,334 more than the only previously available figure.

This analysis indicates that the external fleet could be significantly larger than official EU sources suggest and therefore the amount of fish caught by this fleet and consumed in the EU would also be much larger than previously estimated.

Data gaps in www.whoffishesfar.org

Private Agreements and Chartering Agreements

EU countries also undertake private agreements with certain non-EU countries that grant them private access to fish resources in the waters of these coastal states. This is only allowed in the waters of third countries where there are no SFMAs in place. In addition, EU companies make chartering agreements for their vessels to access the resources of certain coastal states in collaboration with local companies. Even though the vessels benefitting from these agreements fly EU flags or are operated by EU nationals, the EU has not established procedures to ensure that these arrangements comply with EU fisheries or labour laws, nor is there any information publically available.

The access to information request to the EU included basic information on private and chartering agreements. However, the dataset did not provide any information on EU vessels operating under these agreements. Upon further inquiry, the European Commission revealed that under the current legal framework they do not know which EU operators have made agreements with which countries.

Preliminary Conclusions

Urgent need for changes to the legal framework

Following the publication and analysis of WhoFishesFar.org, several key problems have been identified within the current regulatory framework:

- No public information is available on who operates under FAR
- Even if the EU fleet has operated in third country waters under EU sponsored agreements for decades – often supported by taxpayer’s money – basic information about which vessels operate under FAR authorisations or where and what they fish has never been disclosed.
- No requirement exists for private and chartering agreements to adhere to EU standards and laws or to be transparent about fishing activities
- It fails to stop abusive refleagging
- There are known instances of EU operators repeatedly and rapidly switching their vessel’s flag to non-EU states and some of these states are known not to tackle illegal fishing. Vessels that have been operating under flags of countries known to be failing in their efforts to stop illegal fishing are free to return back to the EU fleet and obtain a FAR authorisation with relative ease. These operators are then free to re-flag in the EU and benefit from EU access agreements and subsidies.
- IMO numbers are not required
- A FAR authorisation does not require a vessel to have an IMO number. The lack of a global unique vessel identifier severely hampers any attempt to monitor fishing vessels and fight IUU fishing, as the vessel’s behaviours cannot be tracked on a global scale.

On 10th December, the European Commission released a proposal to revise FAR entitled Proposal on the sustainable management of external fishing fleets. The EU should use this opportunity to address the shortcomings listed above, and ensure that the activities of EU vessels outside EU waters are transparent, accountable and sustainable.

Reference: www.whoffishesfar.org is created by The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), The Pew Charitable Trusts and Vital Voices working together to secure the transparent and effective implementation of the EU Regulation to end illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The coalition is financially supported by Oceana, The Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.