

Tuna liberalisation via free trade agreements and ATQs:

How much duty-free competition can the European fleet absorb?

Bruxelles, 29 May 2026

After publishing a draft CEPA¹ with Indonesia, and in addition to the ATQs² regime, the European Commission has now signed the modernised EU–Mexico Trade Agreement last Friday 22 May 2026. Negotiations are also on-going with Thailand, the biggest tuna processor worldwide, and Philippines, another major tuna harvester.

Mexican frozen tuna fillets already benefit from duty-free access under the existing agreement, which has generated harsh and unfair competition on the tuna fillets and steaks market for European vessels. The revised agreement goes much further by progressively granting a complete duty-free access to the EU market to Mexican tuna loins and canned tuna products.

“These concessions may appear gradual on paper, but the full liberalisation of tuna loins fundamentally changes the economics of the trade and risks creating serious distortions of competition for the European tuna fleet and processing sector.” warned Xavier Leduc, President of the Europêche Tuna Group.

Mexico: A major tuna producer and processor, like Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines...

Mexico is currently the second largest tropical tuna harvester in the Eastern Pacific after Ecuador, operating a large purse seine fleet together with a powerful processing and canning industry concentrated around Mazatlán and other Pacific ports. Mexico also produced more than 155,000 tonnes of canned tuna in 2023, with exports mainly directed to the United States market.³

Although Mexican tuna exports to the EU remain limited today, the removal of tariff barriers could redirect increasing volumes towards Europe in the coming years.

The agreement also comes on top of the EU ATQs, which already allow 35,000 tonnes of tuna loins to enter the EU duty-free every year from any country in the world, mostly utilized by China.

“Vietnam, Indonesia, Mexico... and Thailand and Philippines are coming: how many trade agreements will continue adding new volumes of low-cost duty-free tuna loins competing with European products on the EU market, without questioning the 35,000 tonnes already imported under the ATQ regime?” asked Leduc. *“Enough is enough. We call for the complete elimination of the EU tuna loins ATQ system from 2027 onwards and proper consideration of the EU tuna fishery in free trade agreements.”*

¹ Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

² Autonomous Tariff Quotas

³ According to ANFACO in their [press release of May 27, 2026](#)

What Are the Risks for the European Tuna Sector?

The elimination of tariffs on Mexican tuna products risks creating direct competitive pressure on the European fleet.

Although the agreement maintains strict “wholly obtained” rules of origin for tuna products⁴, Mexico has the fleet capacity and industrial scale to substantially increase originating supplies to the EU market. Strict rules of origin alone are therefore not sufficient to shield the European sector from competitive distortions where major differences persist in production costs and standards.

What Are the Risks for European Consumers?

An audit conducted by the European Commission in 2022⁵ identified significant shortcomings in Mexican sanitary controls for tuna exports to the EU, including cold-chain failures, fuel contamination and colorant injections.

At the same time, Mexico has still not ratified ILO Convention 188 on work in fishing, while environmental concerns remain following the suspension of the MSC certification of its tropical tuna purse seine fishery in 2023.

Anne-France Mattlet, director of Européche Tuna Group, indicates: *“The European fleet is proud to comply with some of the highest sanitary, environmental and social standards in the world, investing heavily every year to meet increasingly demanding EU requirements and more. At the same time, the EU is accelerating the opening of its market to imports produced under standards that would simply not be tolerated for European operators. This is not fair competition. It is organised regulatory asymmetry.”*

What is Européche Requesting?

Europêche calls on the European institutions to eliminate the ATQs on tuna loins from 1st January 2027 and, for all free trade agreements involving tuna, including Mexico:

- Closely monitor the impact of the agreement on the EU tuna sector and ensure rapid safeguard measures in case of market disruption or unfair competition.
- Guarantee strict sanitary, environmental and social controls for imported tuna products.
- Clarify the economic and sustainability assessments that justified the liberalisation of tuna products.
- Request ratification of the ILO Work in Fishing Convention to any signatory of a Trade agreement with the EU.

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⁴ Preferential access is conditional on strict rules of origin, meaning, in this case, that only tuna caught by Mexican vessels, or by EU vessels and processed in Mexico, can benefit

⁵ [Final report of an audit of Mexico carried out from 3 to 16 November 2022 in order to evaluate the control systems in place governing the production of fishery products intended for export to the European Union](#)