

Market evolution: Fish and seafood (CN 03) — 2015–2025

Introduction

This report examines the European Union's extra-EU trade in fish, crustaceans, molluscs and other aquatic invertebrates (CN 03) from 2015 to 2025. The analysis uses official data on value, quantity and unit prices, tracing the main dynamics of imports and exports. Over the period, the value of both flows expanded strongly, yet much of that rise came from prices rather than volumes. The trade deficit widened in absolute terms, but the EU's net import reliance shrank as domestic production soared. The geography of trade was re-shaped by Brexit, the growing role of China as an export destination and a marked increase in imports from Norway, Iceland and Morocco.

Soaring unit values and a widening deficit: value masks volume stagnation

Import and export values climbed by more than 30 %, but the volume picture is far weaker

Overall trade overview

Indicator (EUR, tonnes)	2015	2025	Change
Exports – value (M €)	4 187	5 519	+31.8 %
Exports – quantity (t)	1 597 430	1 427 929	–10.6 %
Exports – price (€/t)	2 621	3 865	+47.4 %
Imports – value (M €)	17 594	25 934	+47.4 %
Imports – quantity (t)	4 258 496	4 635 939	+8.9 %
Imports – price (€/t)	4 132	5 594	+35.4 %
Trade balance (M €)	–13 407	–20 415	–52.3 %

The value of extra-EU imports rose nearly one-half, but the increase in imported volume was less than 9 %. Consequently, the average import price jumped by over one-third. On the export side, value growth of 31.8 % was accompanied by an outright decline in shipped tonnage, so the average export price surged by 47.4 %. The trade deficit, already large in 2015, deepened by more than 50 % in nominal terms.

Product-level detail confirms that price hikes, not volumes, drove the value expansion

Product segment comparison

Imports – selected segments (value in M €, quantity in tonnes)

CN code	Description	2015 value	2025 value	Value Δ %	2015 quantity	2025 quantity	Quantity Δ %	Price Δ %
0302	Fresh/chilled fish	4 710	7 816	+66.0	1 079 289	1 341 933	+24.4	+33.4
0304	Fish fillets	4 478	6 229	+39.1	1 158 467	1 171 435	+1.1	+37.5
0303	Frozen fish	1 748	2 410	+37.9	783 741	753 814	−3.8	+43.4
0307	Molluscs	2 203	3 824	+73.6	580 962	605 298	+4.2	+66.6
0306	Crustaceans	3 451	4 303	+24.7	488 818	626 907	+28.2	−2.8
0305	Dried/smoked fish	860	1 232	+43.3	156 791	126 912	−19.1	+77.0

Exports – selected segments

CN code	Description	2015 value	2025 value	Value Δ %	2015 quantity	2025 quantity	Quantity Δ %	Price Δ %
0303	Frozen fish	1 539	1 734	+12.6	1 123 793	940 692	−16.3	+34.6
0302	Fresh/chilled fish	917	859	−6.3	212 744	153 631	−27.8	+29.8
0304	Fish fillets	657	1 253	+90.8	99 235	115 411	+16.3	+64.0
0307	Molluscs	203	415	+104.0	37 574	63 021	+67.7	+21.6
0306	Crustaceans	418	612	+46.3	77 968	103 161	+32.3	+10.6
0305	Dried/smoked fish	339	552	+62.8	39 103	39 313	+0.5	+61.9

Across almost every import and export segment, unit prices rose far more rapidly than volumes. The largest export value gains came from fish fillets and molluscs, while frozen fish – the dominant export in tonnage – lost volume and posted only a modest value increase. On the import side, fresh fish and molluscs recorded strong volume growth, but even here the price effect accounted for the bulk of the extra expenditure.

Brexit, China and the reorientation of EU seafood trade

The United Kingdom's exit from the single market caused a structural collapse in EU exports

Top trading partners

Before Brexit, the United Kingdom was by far the EU's largest export market for fish and seafood (€1 123 M in 2015). By 2025, exports to the UK had plummeted to €339 M (–69.8 %). The drop occurred in two steps: the immediate post-Brexit adjustment in 2021, when value fell to €299 M, and a further decline in subsequent years. The tonnage shipped shrank from 226 836 t to 48 589 t, while the unit price rose, signalling a shift toward higher-value, low-volume consignments. This shock is captured by a coefficient of variation of 0.62 for UK export volumes, the highest among major EU export destinations (see volatility analysis).

China emerged as the top extra-EU customer, while Norway and Iceland deepened their import dominance

The collapse of UK-bound exports was partly offset by the rapid expansion of sales to China. In 2015, the EU exported €288 M worth of fish to China; by 2025 the figure had reached €760 M (+164.0 %). Exports to Norway also boomed, rising from €89 M to €222 M (+148.2 %), and shipments to the United States (€248 M → €907 M) placed that market among the largest.

On the import side, Norway remained the undisputed leading supplier, growing from €5 194 M to €7 961 M (+53.3 %). Iceland (+125.8 %), Morocco (+91.3 %) and Russia (+64.7 %) all recorded steep value increases, often driven by prices rather than volumes (e.g., Norway's import quantity barely changed, but the average price jumped from €4 355/t to €6 543/t).

Ukraine and Poland illustrate new growth poles in EU fish trade

Imports from Ukraine more than tripled in value, from €41 M to €137 M (+238.2 %), reflecting the country's expanding aquaculture and processing sectors. Among EU Member States, Poland saw its extra-EU exports soar by 189.9 % (€124 M → €359 M), emerging as a vigorous exporter of processed fish. In contrast, Sweden's extra-EU exports virtually collapsed, from €360 M to just €28 M (–92.3 %), but this largely reflects a re-orientation of trade flows rather than a loss of sectoral capacity – Sweden remained the EU's biggest importer (€5 170 M in 2025) and specialised heavily in fish imports (see next section).

Specialisation, concentration and the resilience of EU processors

Sweden, Denmark and Greece remain the most specialised countries, but export concentration has fallen across the EU

Specialisation indicators

In 2025, the highest revealed symmetric comparative advantage (RSCA) scores were recorded by Sweden (0.78), Denmark (0.71) and Greece (0.71), all countries with strong fish-processing and re-export traditions. Portugal (0.44) and Lithuania (0.38) also stood out. The large continental economies – Germany, Italy, France – showed clear de-specialisation (RSCA between –0.62 and –0.15).

Despite this, the concentration of EU exports by destination, measured by the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index, fell from 1 000 in 2015 to 698 in 2025 (–30.1 %), indicating a broader diversification of export markets. Import concentration, on the other hand, edged up slightly from 1 121 to 1 167 (+4.1 %) – still moderately concentrated, with Norway alone supplying about 31 % of extra-EU imports.

Concentration trends

A surge in domestic production sharply improved the EU's net import reliance

Net import reliance

The EU's own production of fish and seafood, measured in value, climbed from €2 557 million in 2003 to €16 109 million in 2024 – a staggering 530 % increase (the quantity rose 214 % over the same period, suggesting strong upgrading as well). As a result, net import reliance dropped from 60.7 % to 29.7 %, and trade intensity fell from 82.9 % to 59.9 %. The EU today meets a much larger share of its consumption from domestic output, even though the absolute trade deficit is larger than in 2015. Export propensity also declined, from 48.3 % to 30.6 %, reflecting the pull of the internal market.

Production volumes

Price shocks in 2022 tested supply stability, especially for key partners

Supply shock analysis

The year 2022 saw a synchronised surge in import prices from several major suppliers. The most extreme event was a price shock from China (import price +30.2 % above baseline, abnormality 48.5), followed by India (+31.3 %) and the Faroe Islands (+73.4 %). Even Norwegian prices jumped 40.7 % above the previous trend. The EU's import basket was broad enough to absorb these shocks without major supply disruption, but the elevated price level persisted into 2023-2024, embedding a new higher cost plateau for processors and consumers.

On the export side, price shocks were recorded for Seychelles, Japan, the United Kingdom and Nigeria in 2022, reflecting global commodity price pressures. The UK export shock

(+29.4 % price rise) occurred simultaneously with the volume collapse already described, aggravating the post-Brexit trade dislocation.

Conclusion

EU extra-EU trade in fish and seafood between 2015 and 2025 was shaped by strong price inflation that propelled values upward even as physical volumes stagnated or declined. The absolute trade deficit widened, but the EU's dependence on net imports fell because domestic production expanded dramatically. Geopolitically, Brexit destroyed the EU's once-dominant export relationship with the United Kingdom, while China, Norway and the United States filled the gap. Imports became more concentrated on Norway and Iceland, but exports diversified. Specialisation remains firmly anchored in the Nordic and southern Member States, while the 2022 price spike exposed the vulnerability of EU processors to global commodity shocks, yet the structural deepening of EU production cushioned the overall balance.

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If you need advice on European trade policy, or representation for your interests in Brussels, feel free to contact me at support@tradedashboard.eu. You can find my CV at [this address](#).