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DG ENVIRONMENT

Commissioner Virginijus SINKEVIČIUS
Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

Title of meeting

VC with COPA-COGECA, 19 June 2020, 11.00 h

BRIEFING NOTE

Name of main contact person:
Telephone number:
Directorate/Unit:

Speech

Ladies and gentlemen,

A very good morning to all of you, from wherever you are connected to this videoconference. I hope you and your families are all doing well, despite the challenging circumstances.

I am very happy to have the opportunity to meet with you, even though it is only virtually.

A lot has happened since I started my mandate 6 months ago. The Coronavirus pandemic has attacked not only our health and our lives, but has created unprecedented challenges for our health systems; it has knocked down the European and global economies; and it has heavily shaken the pillars of our internal market.

This pandemic has shown us how vulnerable we are and how a crisis can suddenly hit even the most developed and technologically advanced countries and societies. A virus, tiny in size, has put in danger everything we had taken for granted, for years: mobility, food security, access to resources and so much more.

It has reminded us how powerful nature is, and how important it is to keep the health of this planet, not least to protect our own health. According to the WHO, globally, an estimated 24% of the burden of disease and 23% of all deaths can be attributed to environmental factors.

The crisis has shown us how dependent our agriculture is on seasonal workers or on import of feed; how dependent our economy is on primary resources from abroad, and how vulnerable our supply chains are in general.

It also demonstrated that behaviours, habits and rules can change, quickly, and with an immediate effect - also on our nature. The crisis has also shown an impressive ability of the food chain, and especially of farmers, to adapt to these difficult circumstances. Their collective effort has made it possible to ensure the security of food supply across the EU, something which many did not take for granted at the beginning of the crisis.

[Biodiversity Strategy and Farm to Fork]

After several months of intense work, the new Biodiversity Strategy, and the Farm to Fork Strategy were adopted on the same day and

they both contribute to the same basic goal: to enable our society to live within planetary boundaries, both now and in the future. We have indeed to think about the young generations and the type of world we are handing to them in the next few years.

Among other things, operating within the planetary boundaries means ensuring that the way we produce food – whether at land or at seas – contributes to our health and wellbeing, rather than undermining it, and to the health of the natural resources and the ecosystems that constitute the basis of our life on this planet.

While many farmers and fishers already strive to produce sustainably, as a whole, the system is presently far from sustainable. In fact, we know that the environmental and climate footprint of the present EU food system exceeds planetary boundaries by a factor of two. This undermines the future of our society, particularly the future of our agriculture and fisheries sectors which desperately depend on healthy and productive soils and marine resources. We need to transform to keep healthy food on our plates and properly rewarded farmers and fishers in our communities.

[Green Deal and Recovery]

The adoption of the two Strategies at this point in time was intentional. It provides, together with the other elements of the EU recovery package, the concrete elements to implement the Green Deal and get the EU economy and society to restart on a sustainable path. Indeed, the 2 strategies provide a vision for 2030, concrete targets to guide future action and investments and a detailed action plan for the mandate of the Commission.

In a moment in which our society discovered itself very vulnerable, they prove that biodiversity protection and restoration is more relevant than ever. Maybe even more relevant than before the crisis, as we now have experienced how ecosystem damage can become a forceful contributor to the outbreaks of zoonotic diseases.

Let me focus a bit on the new Biodiversity Strategy.

The new Biodiversity Strategy tackles the key drivers of biodiversity loss, such as unsustainable use of land and sea, overexploitation of natural resources, pollution, and invasive alien species.

It is a central element of the EU's recovery plan, crucial to preventing and building resilience to future outbreaks and providing immediate business and investment opportunities for restoring the EU's economy.

It also aims to make biodiversity considerations an integral part of EU's overall economic growth strategy.

The Strategy is ambitious, yet balanced. It proposes, among others, to establish binding targets to restore damaged ecosystems and rivers, improve the health of EU protected habitats and species, bring back pollinators to agricultural land, reduce pollution, green our cities, enhance organic farming and other biodiversity-friendly farming practices, and improve the health of European forests. The strategy brings forward concrete steps to put Europe's biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030, including transforming at least 30% of Europe's land and seas into effectively managed protected areas.

[Agriculture]

The Biodiversity and Farm to Fork Strategies address a generational challenge to halt and reverse the decline of biodiversity, which is particularly severe on farmland.

Science tells us that this is necessary and urgent. If we do not tackle the biodiversity crisis, farmers will be the first ones to suffer from soil degradation, water scarcity, pollinators' disappearance. In fact, you have been suffering from this crisis for a number of years. The biodiversity and climate change crisis we are facing requires a transformation of the way we produce food and manage our land, for the benefits in first place of farmers and their perception among citizens and consumers.

The Biodiversity Strategy proposes that 10% of agricultural land should consist of 'high-diversity landscape features', for instance in the form of hedges or flower strips, and the environmental impacts of the agricultural sector should be significantly reduced by 2030. We are not proposing anything new here. The aim is to bring back structural elements that have been so typical for our agricultural landscape over centuries, but that have been lost over the last decades. For instance, in France alone, no fewer than 350,000 hectares of hedges and trees on agricultural land disappeared between 1960 and 1990. This is equivalent to more than 17 times the earth's circumference, just for France.

A quarter of agricultural land should be under organic farming by 2030. Organic farming is a European success story, with demand from the consumer side growing faster than the cultivation area. In

addition to being good for the environment, organic farming is also beneficial in economic terms, creating more jobs than conventional farming. In most Member States, the average organic farm makes more profit than the average conventional farm. We want to increase the demand for organic food even further, which is why the Commission will also propose an Action Plan for organic farming.

We also propose a reduction by 50% of the use and risk of pesticides, as well as the use of the more hazardous/dangerous pesticides, a reduction by 50% in sales of antimicrobials used for farmed animals and aquaculture, a reduction by at least 20% of the use of fertilizers, and to reverse the decline of pollinating insects.

The different targets are also mutually supportive. For instance, enhanced biodiversity facilitates biological pest control, which is good for organic farmers. A greater share of organic farming also facilitates reductions in pesticide use.

We don't see the risk that reducing the use of pesticides, the excess of fertilisers or the restoration of hedges, ponds and tree lines would endanger food security. The EU is the largest exporter of food in the world. Just before the COVID-19 crisis, food exports achieved record levels with a trade surplus of EUR 39 billion in 2019 and even in the first months of the crisis, agricultural exports remained stable and increased compared to a year ago. There is certainly no risk that the EU could no longer feed itself.

It is our firm intention to ensure the long-term sustainability of farming in Europe. And we will only succeed if you support us, getting farmers on board in this transition. Farmers have a lot to win as the

transition bears many new opportunities. And it is important to explain them how to get the most out of the new strategies.

Bringing back landscape elements will have very positive feedback on productivity in agriculture, facilitate pest control, improve soil health and bring climate adaptation benefits. Farmers will chose the least productive land to set aside for biodiversity. And as the Impact Assessment for the current CAP has shown, even a reduction of the overall production would not necessarily entail a financial loss for all farmers because increasing prices, coupled with lowered production costs will help the farmers.
And for those farmers that do need specific support, this should be granted by the Common Agricultural Policy.

[Support to farmers and additional funds]

The Biodiversity Strategy and the Farm to Fork Strategy shall pave the way for a transition towards sustainable farming models. It will be an opportunity, but also a challenge for many farmers, who will have to adapt to new techniques and business models – and this will require some efforts on the farmer's side.

Let me reassure you that we will not leave the farmers alone during this transition. We fully acknowledge the key role of farmers as the guardians of our land. Farmers play an essential role in preserving the EU's biodiversity. This is why we propose ways to support farmers in that task, and to ensure that they continue to thrive. Many farmers have already engaged in sustainable practices, and they need to be acknowledged for that.

The reformed CAP will be an essential instrument to implement the Biodiversity Strategy on farmland. The new way of working, through the national CAP strategic plans, will allow Member States to set their own CAP objectives based on their local conditions and needs. To receive income support, farmers will adhere to environmentally friendly practices and rules. The CAP proposals also put forward 'eco-schemes', which reward farmers for good environmental practices. The agro-environmental measures under rural development will also reward directly farmers that adopt sustainable agricultural practices. We want to make sure that farmers are at the centre of the transformation, and that they have at their disposal all the necessary means and assistance to make the change.

The Commission will make recommendations to each Member State on the nine specific objectives of the CAP, before they formally submit the draft Strategic Plans. The Commission will pay particular attention to addressing the Green Deal targets, and those stemming from the Biodiversity and Farm to Fork Strategies. It will ask Member States to set explicit national values for those targets, taking into account their specific situation and the above mentioned recommendations. Based on these values, the Member States will identify the necessary measures in their Strategic Plans.

The new multiannual budget for the EU presented at the end of May by President Von den Leyen proposes to reinforce the budget for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development by EUR 15 billion to support farmers and rural areas in making the structural changes necessary to implement the European Green Deal, and in particular to support the achievement of the ambitious targets in the new biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies..

In addition, the Just Transition Mechanism will help support those most affected by making investments more attractive and proposing a package of financial and practical support worth at least €140 billion as announced through the European recovery plan.

And finally, the current CAP as well as the future CAP, offer a wide range of instruments to support farmers in this transition, with benefits for them and their communities. An essential element will be the Farm Advisory Services, which shall have a stronger focus on sustainable farming practices, to ensure that all farmers willing to embark in this transition know how to make it happen.

The transformation we are proposing is necessary and unprecedented, but indeed it will only work if it is just - and if it works for all, including the farmers.

[Fisheries]

Let me come to fisheries now. Healthy seas and oceans can play an important role in providing nutritious and sustainable food to humans. Food from the seas supplies more calories with less energy input from the sun since it comes from species that are generally lower down on the food chain. I am talking not only about fish and other sea animals but also about innovative food sources such as algae. The oceans therefore are potentially a very efficient source of food.

The Common Fisheries Policy already aims to ensure that no EU fisheries are operating beyond maximum sustainable yield of fishable species, but work is still needed to ensure its full implementation,

particularly in the Mediterrranean. Work is also needed to eliminate the use of harmful practices such as bottom trawling which destroy ocean biodiversity including, for example, kelp beds that sequester carbon and serve as nurseries for fish. Good fishing techniques (to reduce the capture of unsaleable species and damaged fish) as well as appropriate means of processing and transporting seafood products can also reduce food waste (together with measures to reduce waste at the consumer end of the chain).

Furthermore for seafood to be considered sustainable, it is also important to address its impact after it has been landed. Through the F2F, the Commission aims to help fishers to transition to sustainable production methods.

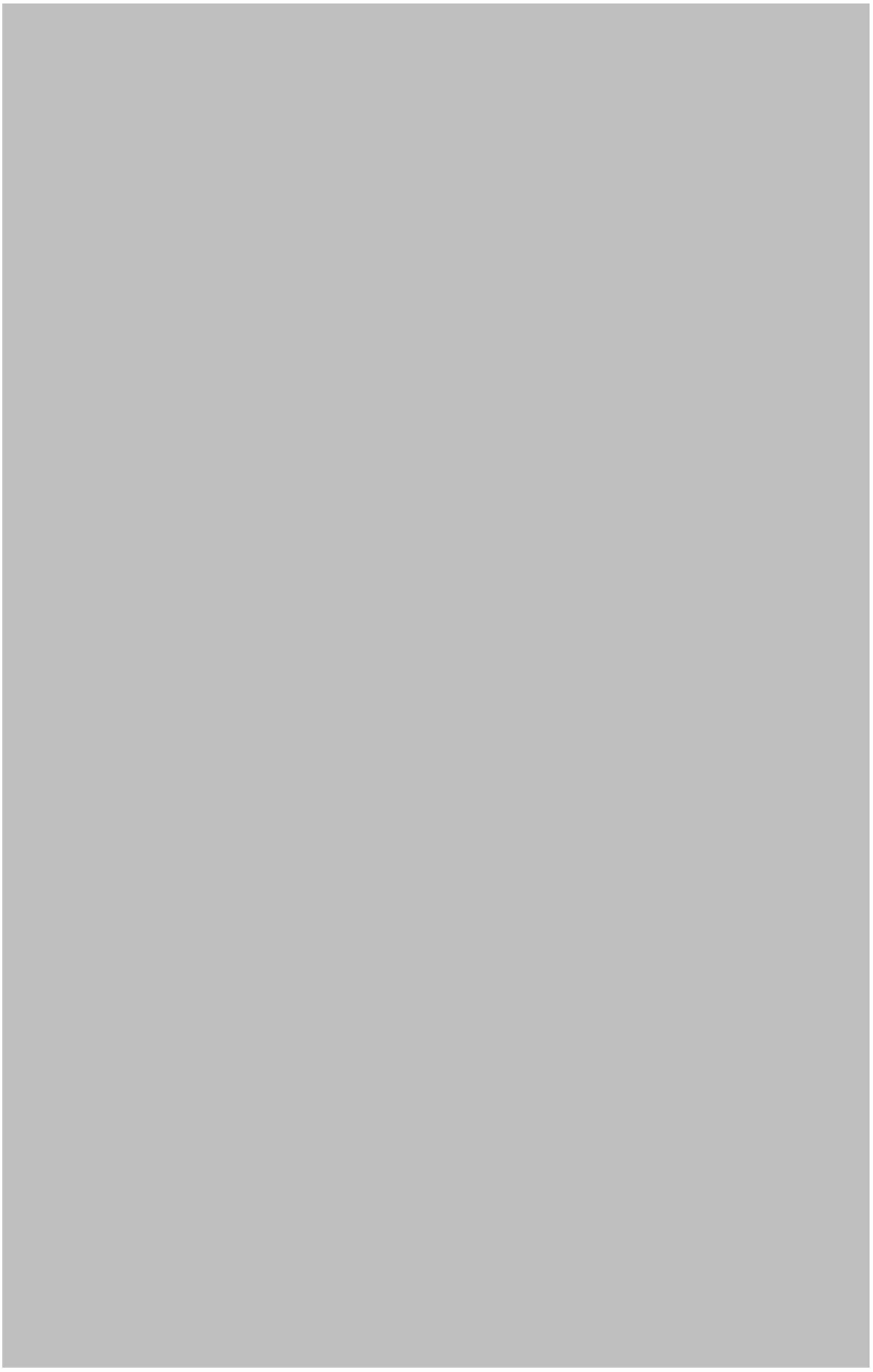
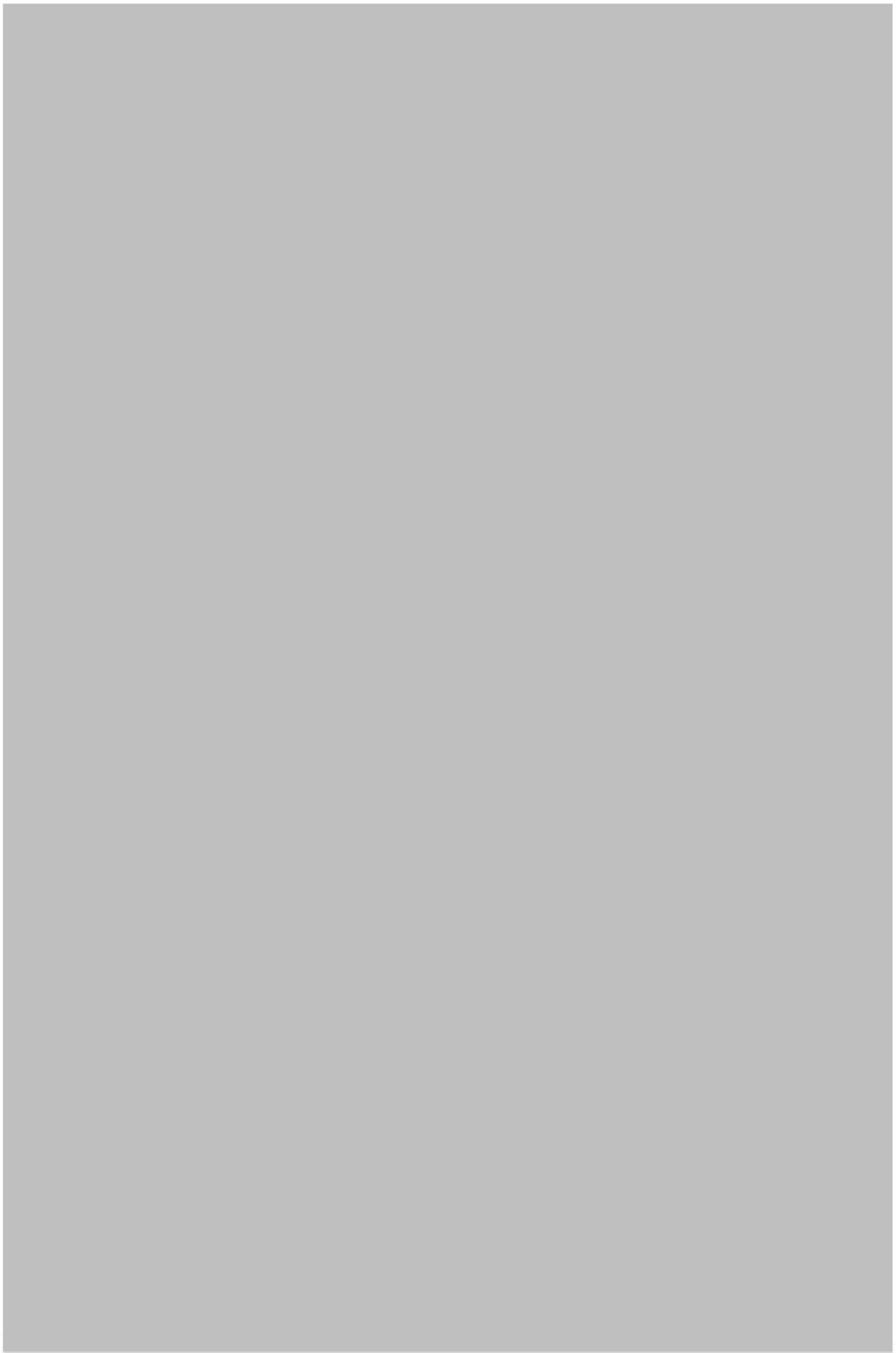
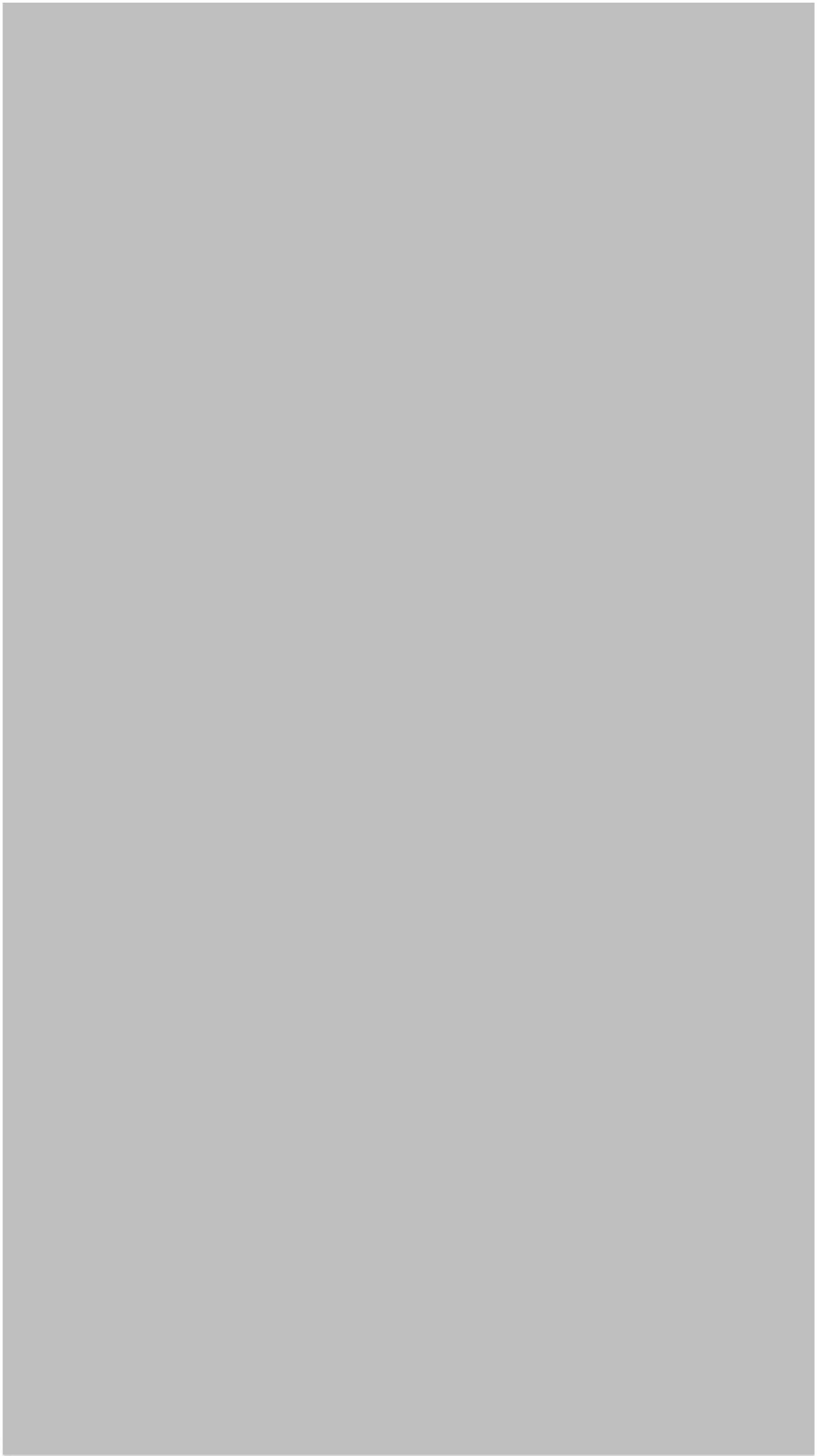
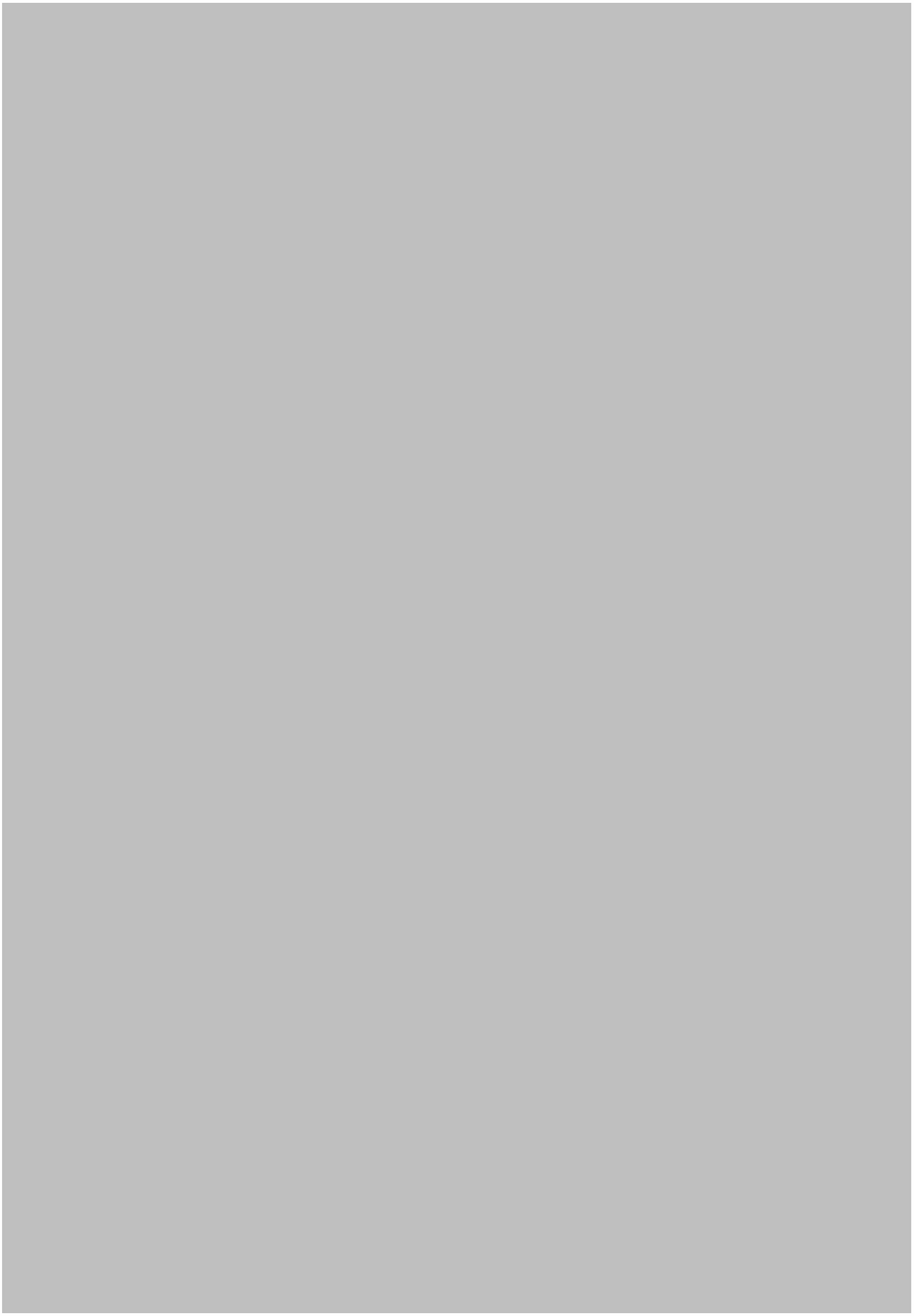
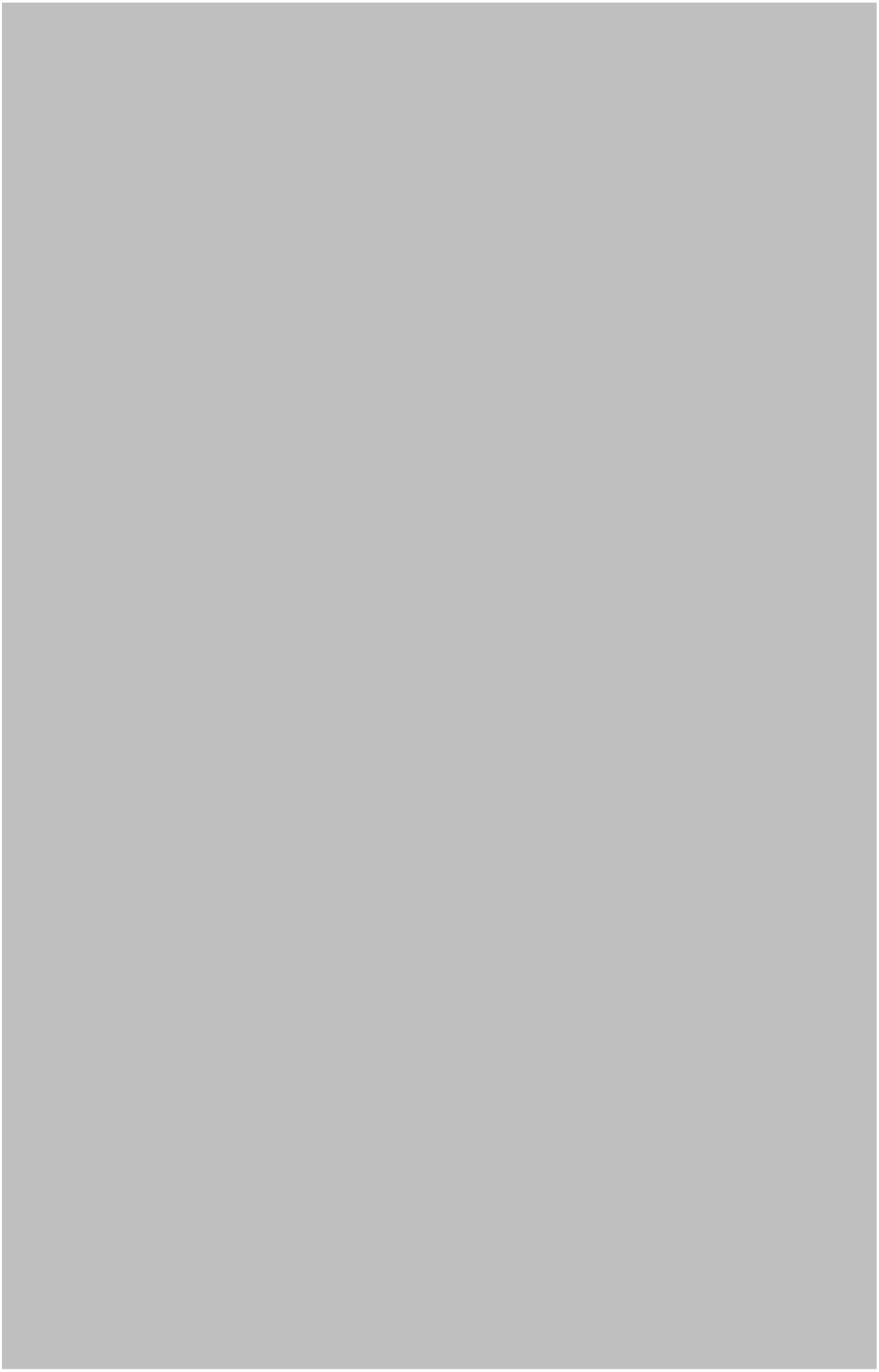
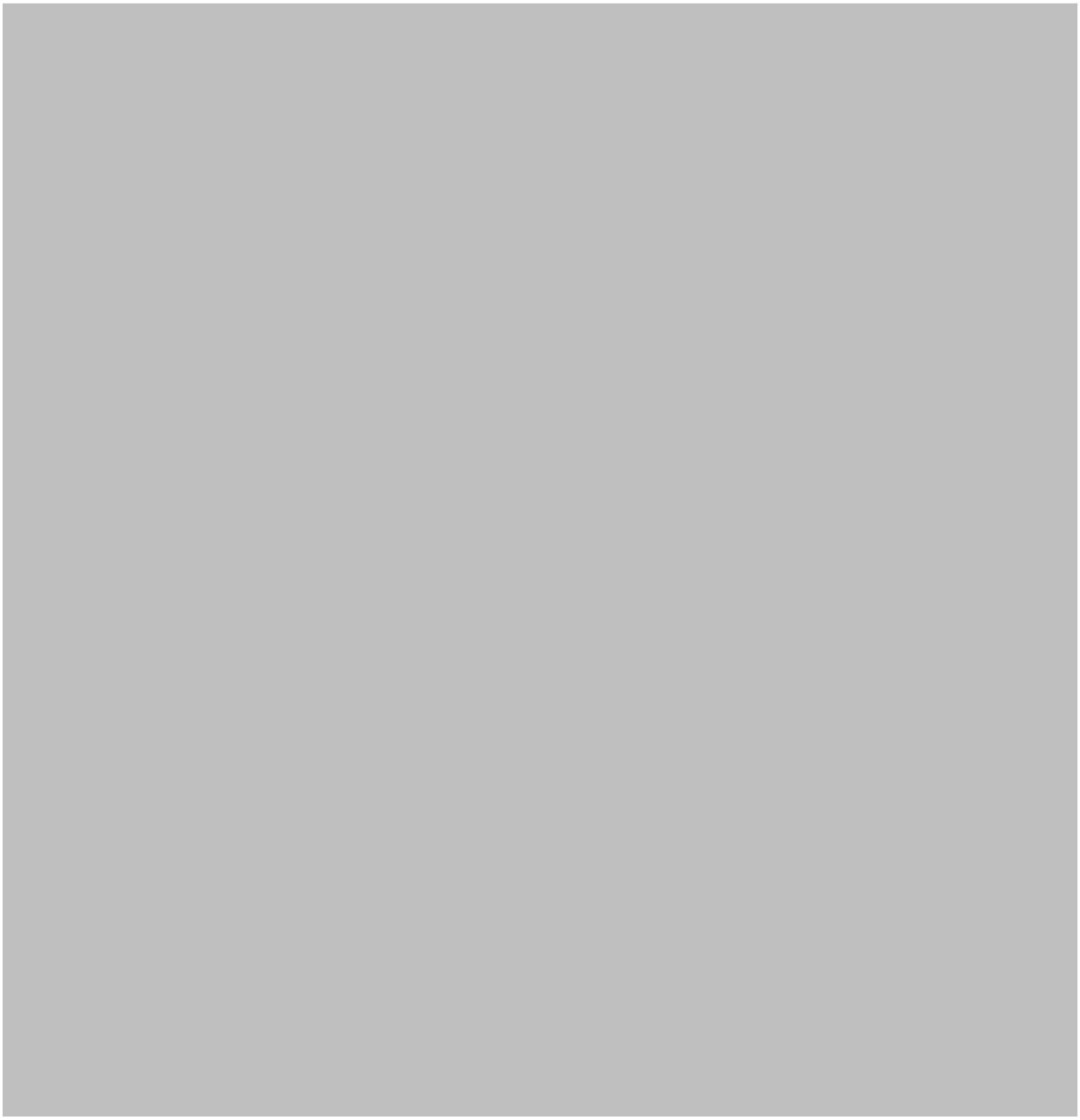
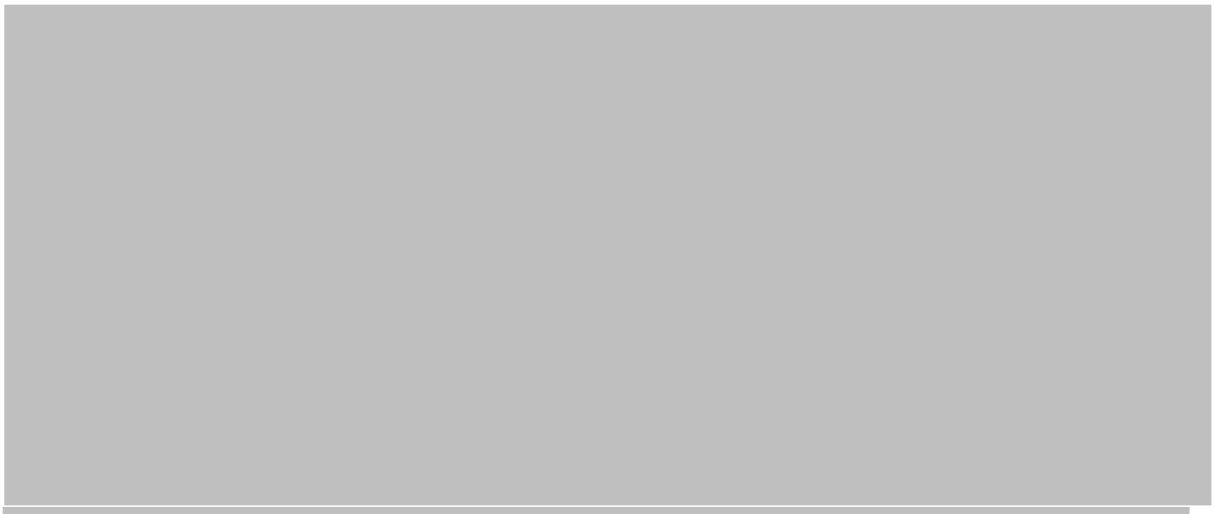
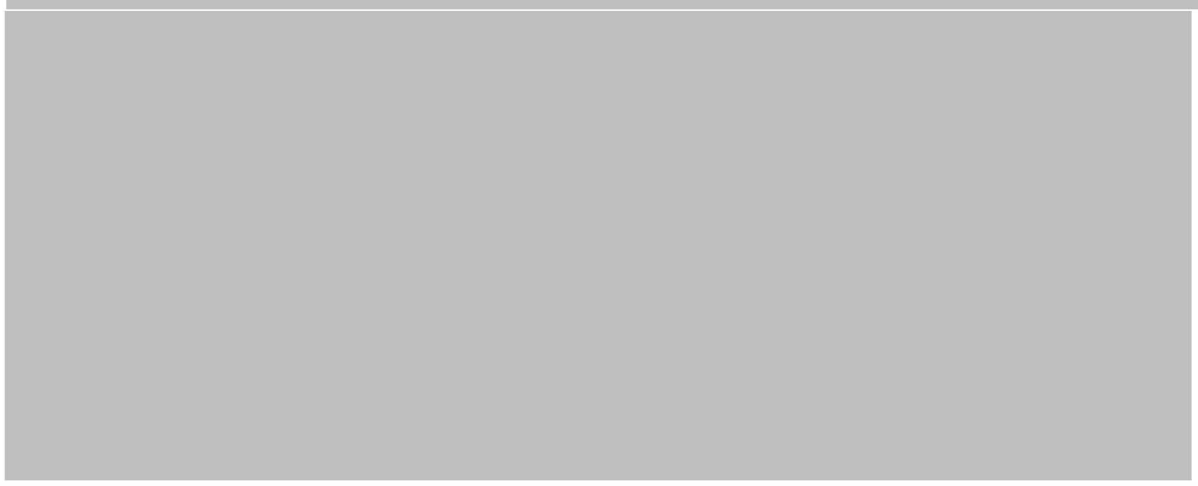
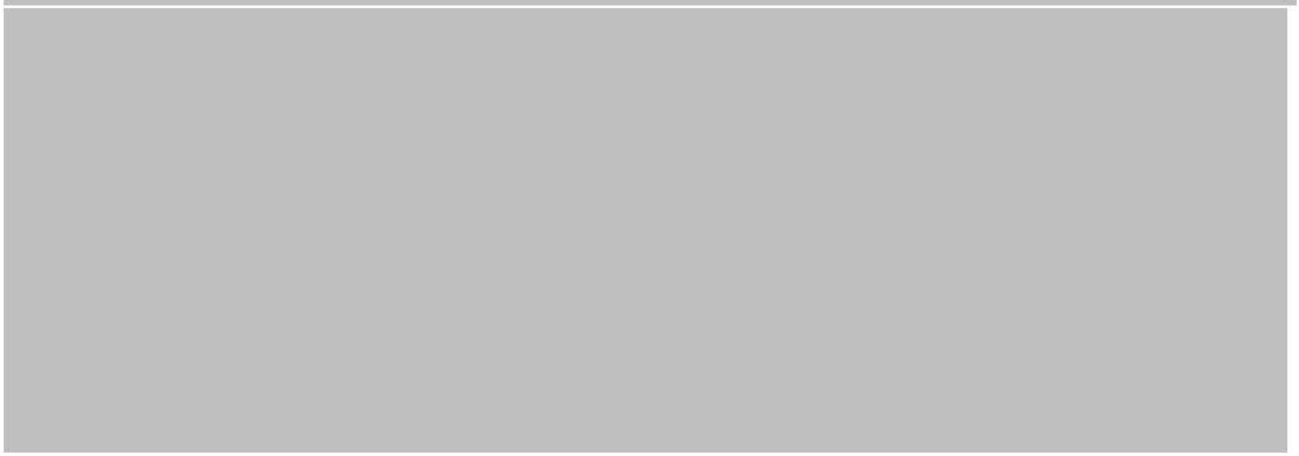
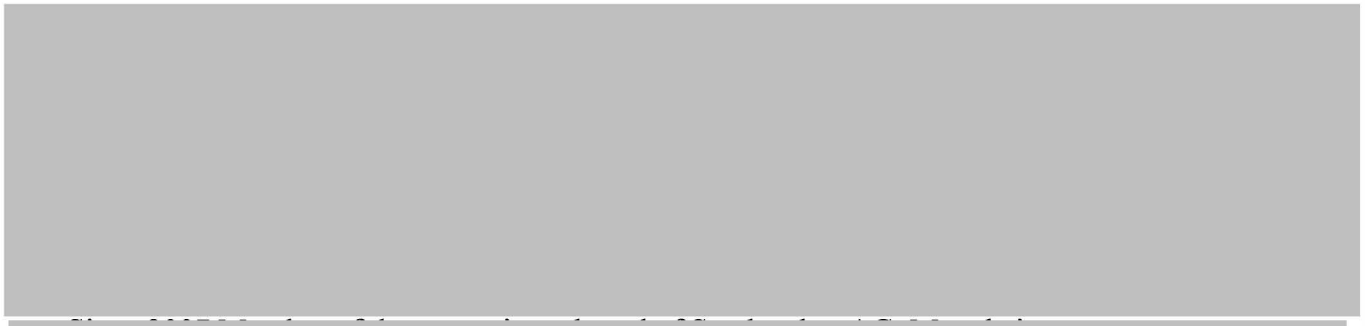
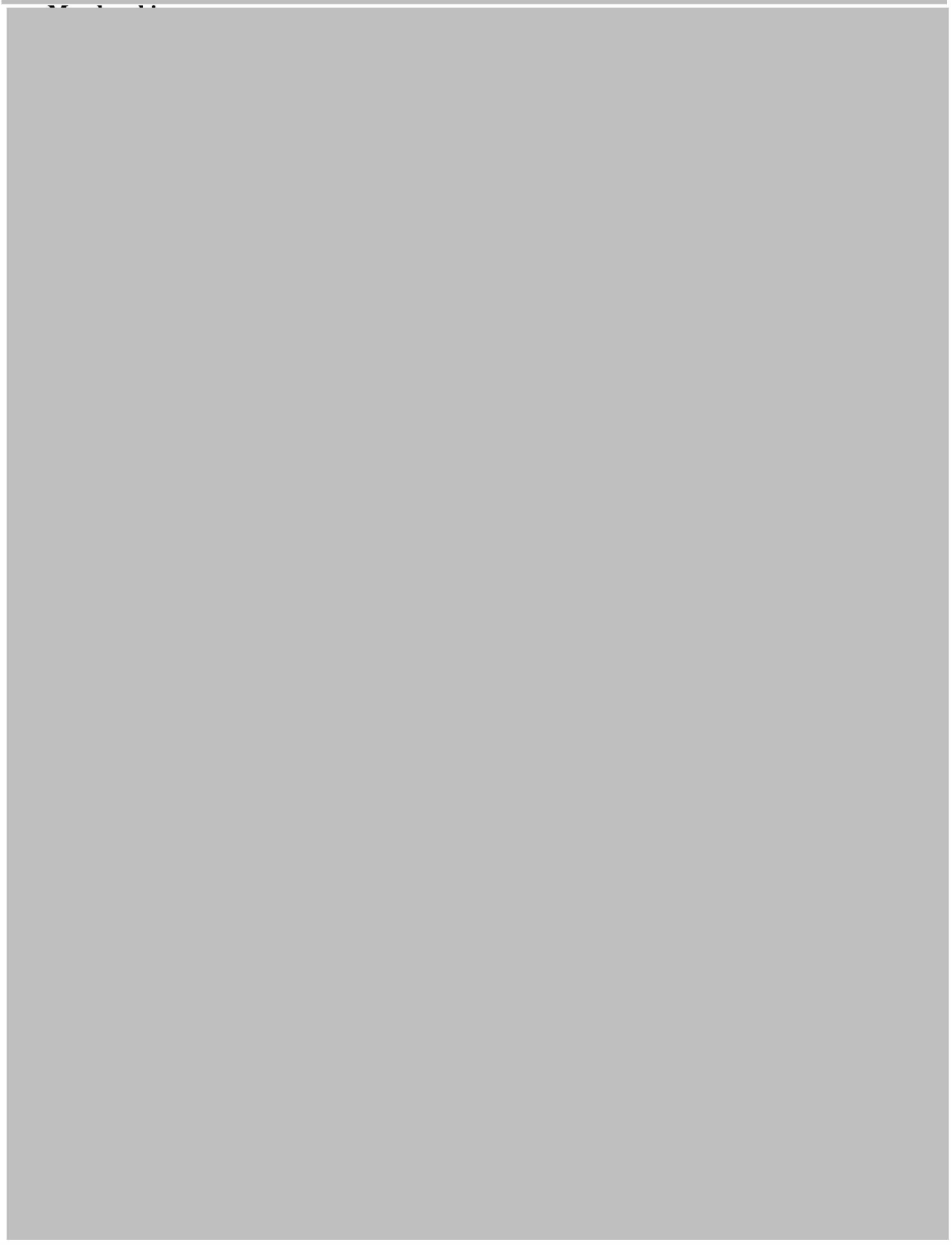
Fishers require knowledge and support from advisory services to help them in transitioning to sustainable sea food systems, including sustainable aquaculture production. Food companies also have an important role to play in supporting suppliers by rewarding sustainable produce. Transparency in supply chains is also key to giving consumers the information needed to make sustainable choices and provide a market for sustainable produce.

[Concluding remarks]

Investing in the successful implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy and of the Farm to Fork strategy means investing in our, and especially our children's and grandchildren's, life insurance. This is the path that science indicates to us. We should ensure that the recovery from the crisis is not built on the same ground that

facilitated, if not caused, the crisis. We have to recover better and choose the future we have been looking for.

The recovery is an opportunity to speed up the transition towards sustainable agriculture. There are plentiful examples of innovative practices that have managed to provide economic, social and environmental benefits to society, and we must ensure these examples are replicated at a larger scale.

We know that this transition will only succeed if all stakeholders of the food chain work together, and the commitment of farmers will be essential. I count on your support to convince and motivate farmers to be part of this transition. Experience shows that early adopters of new techniques are more successful than those delaying changes until they are unavoidable. Let’s start the transition together and let’s aim for the triple win, reconciling economic, social and environmental development.

Thank you.