

Policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries

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PURPOSE: to propose a policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries.

BACKGROUND: data on discards in European fisheries have been collected systematically under the Data Collection Regulation since 2002. The Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) has provided a preliminary overview⁴ of discard rates based on data from 2003-2005. Discard rates are in the range of 20-60% of the catch weight for various typical fisheries exploiting demersal stocks. Cod fisheries in the Baltic were estimated to have low discards. In the North Sea, Beam trawls were estimated to discard 40 to 60% of the catch and demersal trawls around 40%. In the areas west of the British Isles, bottom trawling gear discard in the range of 20-40%. In the more southerly Atlantic Community waters, trammel and gill nets discard less than 20% while bottom trawling gears discard in the range of 30 to 60%.

Discarding, therefore, is contrary to both the aims of the Common Fisheries Policy, and to specific commitments made by the European Union, such as those under the UN Convention on Biodiversity, or the commitment to manage fish stocks for sustainable yield given at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development.

CONTENT: discarding has been addressed in the EU before, mainly through measures regulating fishing gear, such as net mesh sizes or the use of escape panels in, or acoustic devices on nets. Some types of fishing gear have had considerable success but the application of the related measures is already complicated to apply and control. To make it more complex would be counter-productive.

The Commission believes that a management system based on outcomes, defined in terms of maximum acceptable by-catch, together with an obligation to land all fish caught, will provide a strong incentive for fishermen to devise the technical solutions that are most appropriate to their own activities. Such a system would also be far simpler for all parties to implement and enforce. Flanking measures would include encouragements to improve the selectivity of fishing gear, area closures and obligations to switch fishing grounds when there are aggregations of young fish, for example.

Socio-economic impacts of this new policy: these will be highly variable dependent on the specific structure and economic situation of each fishery and the dependent coastal communities. Economic and social impact assessments will therefore be made on the level of regulations for specific fisheries.

On a very general level, the progressive implementation of a policy to eliminate discards could result in net short-term cost increases and losses in income. Handling and storing by-catch of lower value has a cost and the income from the overall landing will be lower. The use of closed areas and requirements to move to other fishing grounds may imply longer distances to the fishing grounds and thus increased cruise time and fuel costs. The compulsory use of selective gears could similarly reduce short term profitability. Further impacts are to be expected further down the marketing and distribution chain, resulting from the landing and handling of fish that was so far discarded.

In the longer term there will be economic benefits as a reduction of by-catches of juvenile fish and fish above quota will result in larger and healthier stocks and thus increased fishing opportunities. Furthermore, additional markets could be created for products derived from catches which have been discarded in the past. Enforcement should be supplemented with encouragements to avoid unwanted bycatches and discarding. A possible encouragement is to introduce a preferential status such as preferential access to fisheries on the basis of track records of low by-catches.

It could be considered whether the development of changes in technology and practices which are required may be supported by the EFF. Assistance may also be given to develop alternatives for the use of previously discarded fish, in particular unavoidable by-catches of species of low or no commercial value. Assistance could be considered for the development of advanced fishing tactics on the basis of information systems to inform fleets about areas with high risk of unacceptable by-catch.

Based on this document, the implementation principles for a policy to progressively eliminate discards and reduce unwanted by-catches in European fisheries will be discussed with Member States and stakeholders in 2007. A sequence and plan for implementation for specific fisheries will be identified. According to this plan, regulations will then be developed and proposed from 2008.