

Big cod fraud

Catch limits for cod are a fiction. Nobody sticks to the limits and the Polish government as well as the European Commission turn a blind eye on this fact

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“All Polish fishermen catch more than the quota allocated to them by the European Commission, because if they would follow the rules, they would die of hunger” – says |Grzegorz Hałubek, chairman of the Polish fishermen Association.

80 percent of income of the Polish fishermen comes from cod. For the year 2004, the European Commission allocated to Poland 16 thousand tonnes of cod.

During the same year, Poland exported as much as 52 thousand tonnes of cod products, which means that as much as 70-100 thousand tonnes of cod was taken.

During the meeting of the Committee of the European Union, former Minister of Agriculture, Jozef Pilarczyk admitted: Grey zone exists in Poland, as well as in other countries around the Baltic.

How does it function?

When going to the sea, Polish fishermen takes onboard a logbook. After returning to the port he is obliged to fill in the amount of cod landed.

Everybody cheats – says Hałubek – They have let’s say 3 tonnes of cod under deck, but write only one into the logbook. A customer with a truck waits for him in the port. They load the entire catch, write an invoice for 3 tonnes, and the master of the fishing vessel gets cash – approximately 5.5 thousand zlotys for one tonne.

A logbook is only a smokescreen in case an inspector of the fishery control comes to the port. But he does not come.

Nobody abides to the limits, so the inspectors have stopped controlling – says Hałubek – A few years ago they controlled the landings. Bribes were common. Not anymore, because they would have to bring all Polish fishermen to justice, and no authority would like to have such a problem.

In theory, a fisherman can pay a fine of as much as 110 thousand zlotys for illegal fishing. But nobody in the Fishermen’s Associations has ever heard of any fines being imposed on fishermen.

New limits needed

Cod trade is a huge business, according to unofficial estimates of the Association of Fish Processors worth a billion zlotys per year. Approximately 500 points of first sale have been registered in the Ministry of Agriculture. These are small firms, which buy fish directly from the fishing boat and deliver to the fish processing plants. Approximately 80 percent of cod delivered by them is illegal.

A fish has no mark saying whether it is caught legally within the limits or not, but it is true that there is massive fraud –Jerzy Safader, chairman of the Association of fish Processors, owner of a fish processing plant himself, admits – catch limits are a fiction. We all cheat and make fun of ourselves. It is high time to declare the real catches. We as well as fishermen do not want to violate the EU regulations, but limits set too low make us do so. New limits must be set.

Apart from 500 small points of first sale, 5 big, state – owned points have recently been established on the Polish coast. The Fish Auction in Ustka is the biggest of them. Similarly to the other four, it was built with the funds from the EU PHARE programme.

It is nonsense: the EU have the money for modern points of sales, but at the same time – due to low limits – the points are not profitable – says Michal Wawryn, chairman of the Fish Auction. – We can only accept legal fish and this means we are losing.

Wawryn in a half joking manner, gives an idea how to solve the problem: - the state owned points should accept legal fish, and the private ones - unreported fish. For private firms, legal fish is a minor share of the profit, but it is crucial for our existence.

- This is really a joke, this way we would divide the customers into those who steal and the good ones, nobody will go for that –Jerzy Safader comments the idea. – the problem with the Fish Auction in Ustka is that it is too big. They built a monster, which, even if it takes all legal fish, will never be profitable.

- The European Commission is very well aware of the fact that the cod quota is overfished to a large extent – says Zbigniew Karnicki, Vice-Director of the Sea Fisheries Institute in Gdynia. – However, the Commission does not dispose of a mechanism to enforce strict control of catch limits by the Baltic countries. We have proposed a solution to the problem: increase cod quota considerably, but at the same time prolong closed seasons. Fishermen will be able to fish more, but at the same time the stock will be protected, because they will go to the sea less often.

Cod quota are overfished not only by Polish fishermen. According to the official data of the Swedish Board of Fisheries, the Swedish fleet consists of 1852 vessels. Catch limit for cod, which in the case of Sweden is almost equal to the Polish one, is divided between 531 vessels. What are other 1300 vessels doing? Officially, they stay in ports and do not go to the sea.

- We know very well that it is not so, we are in touch with Swedish fishermen – says Grzegorz Hałubek – All boats go to the sea and fish. 531 vessels divided the entire quota between themselves and the rest can fish as much as they want, because nobody will control them. They act entirely within the grey zone and do not submit any reports.

- All Baltic countries exceed their cod quota, in Poland and Sweden - to the greatest extent – admits Zbigniew Karnicki. – Nobody knows how things are in Russia. The EU is at the moment negotiating the catch limits with them.

How to increase the limits

Low catch limits for cod result from the necessity to protect the species. Since years ecological organisations have been alarming the European Commission that the cod population decreases.

This is not true, we, the fishermen know better that there is quite a lot of fish. – says Hałubek. It is true that official documents from EU state that cod stocks in the Baltic are systematically growing.

- This is because the awareness of fishermen has increased in the last few years – we do not catch juveniles, only mature fish. On the contrary to huge industrial fishing vessels, fishing for animal feed. – says Hałubek. – They are the ones who make real disaster in the Baltic. Industrial fishing in the Baltic is carried out mainly by Denmark and Sweden. Huge trawls with very small meshes fish everything from the top to the seabed.

- Industrial fishing vessels fish sprat and herring, but the fishing method enables them to catch a lot of juvenile cod – admits Karnicki. - A ban on industrial fishing would permit to increase the quota for vessels fishing mature cod.

Poland has several raised the problem of industrial fishing at meeting of the European Commission and asked for a ban. Our proposals were rejected by Denmark and Sweden.

