



P R E S S R E L E A S E

Agreement on deep-sea protection in North East Atlantic: too little too late

London, 17 November 2008. The annual meeting of the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) in London 10-14 November failed to take necessary steps to protect deep-sea ecosystems on the high seas and missed the deadline for protection measures set by the UN General Assembly.

At the UN in 2006, high seas fishing nations agreed to tackle the imminent threat of destructive fishing, particularly bottom trawling, that vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems such as sponge field and cold-water coral reefs are facing. The actions agreed include the assessment of the impact of all bottom fishing; identification of areas where vulnerable marine ecosystems are known or likely to occur; and implementation of measures to protect these ecosystems from bottom fishing by December 31, 2008 or close these areas altogether to bottom fishing.

NEAFC countries* failed to follow through on this commitment. They did not adopt a proposal by Norway to close several areas on the Mid Atlantic Ridge where vulnerable marine ecosystems occur, nor did they follow clear scientific advice to extend existing closures on Rockall and Hatton Banks to protect coral reefs. "Disregarding available scientific knowledge, NEAFC has carelessly missed the deadline set by the international community. Decisions are now deferred to an intransparent closed-shop meeting in March next year." said Christian Neumann of WWF.

A "move-on" rule was agreed instead - meaning that a high seas bottom fishing vessel is required to move two nautical miles from an area if the vessel brings up more than 100 kilograms of live corals or 1000 kilograms of sponges. "These are ludicrously high quantities, far higher than the limits in the order of magnitude of 2-5 kg of corals or sponges recommended by scientists. This measure will do little to protect corals, sponges and other vulnerable deep-sea habitats and ecosystems" said Monica Verbeek of Seas At Risk.

A "move-on" rule is a mechanism of last resort which should apply only after impact assessments have been done and areas likely to be vulnerable to bottom fishing have been identified and closed. "As far as we can tell, NEAFC countries have not yet conducted impact assessments of any high seas bottom fishing activities in the Northeast Atlantic" said Matthew Gianni of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition. "The UN General Assembly has called on States to prohibit high seas bottom fisheries in 2009 until they do, and ensure that deep-sea ecosystems are properly protected. The move-on rule adopted by NEAFC last week does not fulfill the requirements established by the UN."

Other deep sea fisheries related outcomes at NEAFC include a prohibition of direct fisheries for spurdog, a depleted shark species redlisted "vulnerable". However, numerous sharks will still be taken in large numbers as bycatch in high seas bottom fisheries. The fishery for orange roughy, a similarly vulnerable and depleted deep-sea fish species will still be allowed, in spite of a proposal from the European Union to close the fishery.



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*The NEAFC Contracting Parties are the EU, Iceland, Norway, Denmark in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the Russian Federation.

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition is a coalition of over sixty environmental and fishers' organisations worldwide: www.savethehighseas.org

Seas At Risk is a European association of non-governmental environmental organisations working to protect and restore to health the marine environment of the European seas and the wider North East Atlantic: www.seas-at-risk.org

WWF is one of the world's largest and most experienced independent conservation organizations, with almost 5 million supporters and a global network active in more than 100 countries. WWF works to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature: www.panda.org