

Discard madness must be stopped first

In spite of very weak recruitment and increased discard levels, ICES has today recommended a North Sea cod quota of up to 40.000 tonnes for 2010. This advice assumes that a number of agreed, but not yet implemented, measures to reduce discarding and high-grading are finally applied in all North Sea bottom fisheries.

Today's advice for fish stocks in the North Sea renews Greenpeace concerns of last year, when politicians decided to dish out higher quotas under the promise that measures would be put in place to reduce discarding. In reality, discard levels have grown and are now higher than ever before.

"It is ludicrous to provide a scientific recommendation that is based on promises of political action. The EU must first ensure that its fishermen don't catch cod where they should not be catching it, because this leads to cod being thrown overboard dead. Once responsible management is in place, quotas should be set at levels that are in line with precautionary management recommendations," said Truls Gulowsen in Greenpeace.

Greenpeace advice against any directed North Sea cod fishing until the stock is rebuilt and proper regulations to stop discarding of cod in particular are in place for all North Sea bottom fisheries.

Measures agreed during the third and final round of talks last year included a ban on dumping of marketable fish and implementation of a Real-Time Closures scheme. Technologies that allow for automatic high-grading of the catch have been forbidden.

The EU Commissioner Borg also cautioned against too much confidence in the fishery: "North Sea cod must be more than 4 years old before most of the individual fish are mature and can take part in spawning but presently 93 percent of the fish caught are immature." (Commission Working Paper: Reflections on further reform of the Common Fisheries Policy).

Greenpeace now urges fisheries managers of the North Sea fish stocks to adopt comprehensive ecosystem-based management plan for the whole North Sea. An ecosystem based management plan must include spatial planning where vital habitats are set aside as fully protected. For the cod stock to recover all directed fishery for cod needs to be stopped combined with quota reductions in fisheries where cod is taken as by-catch, new gear regulations, better surveillance systems at sea and on land and tough measures to ban discarding and illegal fishing.

"If North Sea cod is going to recover, then we're going to have to see many more areas closed to fishing. This won't just protect the future for cod and other fish - it will also protect the future of the fishing industry," said Truls Gulowsen in Greenpeace.

Real-time closures are an important measure to protect juvenile fish but a comprehensive and transparent system needs to be implemented and proven to work before any quota can increase.

The Scottish "Conservation Credits Scheme" has been pointed as a way forward, but the ICES advice note that the scientists have "not yet been able to evaluate the consequences of these measures. Despite their introduction, ICES notes that during the initial year of operation (2008) cod discarding rates increased substantially."