

Brussels, 15 September 2010

European Commission's proposal on fishing opportunities: why and how?

What are TACs and Quotas?

Ideally, fishing activities would take from each stock no more fish than can safely be removed without inhibiting the stock's capacity to spawn and to bring in young fish to the stock. Conservation lies at the core of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and measures aimed at calculating safe levels of capture and ensuring that they are respected are among the main measures under this policy.

Setting total allowable catches (TACs) means fixing the maximum quantities of fish that can be landed from a specific stock over a given period of time. TACs are set on the basis of a proposal from the Commission, but final power of decision rests with the Council of Fisheries Ministers.

The Regulation adopted by the Council also contains an allocation key for sharing out the TACs in the form of quotas among Member States. When the CFP was established, a formula was devised to divide TACs up according to a number of factors, including countries' past catch record. This formula is still used today, on the basis of what is known as the principle of 'relative stability', which ensures Member States a fixed percentage share of fishing opportunities for commercial species.

How are TACs and quotas decided?

Each year, Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for the following year are decided by the Council of Fisheries Ministers. Fishing opportunities for the Baltic Sea are decided in October, for the Black Sea in November or December, and for the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea in December. The TACs for deep sea species are set every second year.

The Council's decision is the last stage in a long process involving scientists and, in many cases, fishermen from the Member States through the Regional Advisory Committees (RACs). In spring every year, the Commission publishes a consultation document outlining the principles it will use to interpret scientific advice when proposing fishing opportunities for the following year (see IP/10/574).

Scientific advice is provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), which uses biological data collected by national research institutes from research campaigns and landing records to assess the state of the main commercial stocks (stocks targeted by fishermen). The stock assessments for the north-east Atlantic are then examined by the group of national experts who sit on the ICES Advisory Committee on Fishery Management (ACFM), which then delivers a report containing its analysis and recommendations for TACs to the European Commission.

The European Commission subsequently consults its own advisers – the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries (STECF), which is also made up of national experts. Negotiations are also held with non-EU countries and regional fisheries organisations which have an interest in or responsibility over the same fishing grounds or stocks. In the case of joint stocks, such as cod in the North Sea, the Commission negotiates bilaterally with Norway.

The Commission then analyses the various options and sets out proposals for the following year's total allowable catches and the conditions under which they may be caught. These proposals are discussed informally with stakeholders and with the Member States, before being submitted to the Council of Ministers, which takes the final decision regarding both TACs and any related measures.

This annual mechanism has often resulted in fluctuations which have not only prevented fishermen from planning ahead, but have also failed to conserve fish stocks. As a result, under the new CFP, the EU is beginning to move towards setting long-term quantifiable objectives for attaining and/or maintaining safe levels of fish stocks in European waters, as well as the measures needed to reach these levels, so that annual TACs are not isolated annual decisions, but part of a multi-annual effort to manage the fisheries.

Multi-annual plans are now being put in place for all major commercial stocks. This change of approach means that for these stocks, major decisions on admissible catch levels are no longer being taken in quite the same way, under very tight deadlines at the end of each year. Instead, each plan contains a formula for calculating annual TACs and quotas on the basis of the scientific advice received. The Commission is thus able to consult extensively in advance with all the parties concerned on the objectives to be achieved under each plan and how they should be met. All plans are based on a precautionary approach to fisheries management which seeks to ensure that fisheries are sustainable and to minimise their impact on the marine environment.

How do multi-annual plans prevent the TACs and quotas from fluctuating as they did before?

As a general principle, the multi-annual plans stipulate that the variation in TACs from one year to the next cannot exceed 15%, whether the change is an increase or a reduction. This constraint was arrived at through extensive consultation with the fishing industry, and represents the maximum level of variation which fishermen feel is compatible with economic stability. However, when the state of a given stock requires particularly urgent and stringent measures, such as may be necessary to save it from collapse, then a reduction greater than 15% may be proposed.

Who are the scientists who provide the Commission with advice? What is ICES?

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) is an international organisation which coordinates and promotes marine research in the North Atlantic, including adjacent seas such as the Baltic Sea and North Sea. It currently has 19 members, which are all states bordering the North Atlantic, and draws on contributions from more than 1600 marine scientists. The 20 member countries of ICES are: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

ICES is the leading independent authority for advice on the marine ecosystem to governments and international regulatory bodies that manage the North Atlantic Ocean and adjacent seas. Scientists working through ICES gather information about the marine ecosystem. As well as working to fill gaps in existing knowledge, they also develop this information to give unbiased, non-political advice on ecosystem and fisheries management. More information can be found at the ICES website: <http://www.ices.dk>

The Advisory Committee on Fishery Management (ACFM) is responsible, on behalf of the Council, for providing scientific information and advice on living resources and their harvesting. The ACFM meets twice a year (summer and late autumn). In formulating its advice on the management of around 135 stocks of fish and shellfish, the ACFM uses information prepared by numerous ICES stock assessment working groups.

And what is the STECF?

The implementation of the CFP requires the assistance of highly qualified scientific personnel, particularly in the fields of marine biology, marine ecology, fisheries science, fishing gear technology and fisheries economics. For that purpose the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) was established by Commission Decision 93/619/EC, renewed in 2005 by Commission Decision 2005/629/EC.

The Members of the STECF are appointed by the Commission from among highly qualified scientists on the basis of their expertise, and consistent with a geographical distribution that reflects the diversity of scientific issues and approaches within the Commission. The term of a Member of the Committee is three years and is renewable.

The Committee may form internal working groups, whose meetings can also be attended by invited experts. The Joint Research Centre provides the secretariat of both the Committee and the working groups, and the Commission establishes the terms of reference.

The STECF may be consulted at regular intervals by the Commission on matters pertaining to the conservation and management of living aquatic resources, including biological, economic, environmental, social and technical considerations.

The Committee produces an annual report on the situation as regards fisheries resources and on developments in fishing activities. It also reports on the economic implications of the fishery resources situation.

More information about STECF can be found at:

http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/partners/stecf/index_en.htm

What long-term plans are already in place? What further plans have either been proposed or will be proposed soon?

Since 2003, the Council has established long-term plans for cod in the North Sea, Kattegat, Skagerrak, eastern Channel, west of Scotland, the Celtic Sea and Irish Sea (a new version of which came into effect in 2009); for northern hake stocks; and for southern hake and Norway lobster off the Iberian Peninsula.

In addition, multi-annual plans are in place for the stock of sole in the Bay of Biscay, sole in the Western channel, sole and plaice in the North Sea, Baltic Sea cod and West of Scotland herring.

The Commission has, moreover, made proposals for long-term plans for anchovy in the Bay of Biscay and for the western stock of Atlantic horse mackerel. A revised version of the long-term plan for northern hake was also been proposed in 2009.

Further details on long-term plans can be found at:

http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/fishing_rules/multi_annual_plans/index_en.htm

What changes have occurred to effort management in long-term plan?

The 2003 cod plan had introduced a maximum number of days at sea for vessels with certain fishing practices per area. This system became excessively complex and suffered from too wide a range of special conditions and derogations. The new effort management under the 2008 cod plan fixes maximum amounts of kilowatt-days per gear group for each Member State and area of cod stock. It then lets Member States allocate the amount of kilowatt-days available to the end-users, vessels or vessel groups. In doing so, Member States have some room for manoeuvre in terms of adding up the maximum effort according to certain cod-avoidance practices or having vessel groups which continuously do not catch more than 1.5% of cod excluded from the effort regime. Adaptations to effort levels are made on a yearly basis, starting this year, and are proportionate to the targeted reductions in fishing mortality, whereby a reduction will only apply to gear groups that account for 80% of the cod catches in a cod stock area. This year saw the introduction of this new system, and national administrations have encountered transition problems which are not easy to manage. However, the fact that the new effort rules are perceived as being meaningful for fishermen's fishing strategies is a good sign that the new system will work more effectively than the old one. An extension of this system to other effort regimes is possible at a Member State's request, and the Commission is working on widening its use.