



Call on MEPs to reject irresponsible Council approach on fisheries reform

On 12 June 2012, the Fisheries Council adopted a preliminary position on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), pre-empting the votes in the fisheries committee and plenary of the European Parliament. Our organisations are deeply concerned by the lack of ambition in the Council's text and consider this *General Approach* to be unfit for resolving the disastrous environmental, social and economic situation in European fisheries.

75% of fish stocks in the EU are overexploited and almost one-third of fishing jobs have been lost in the last decade. In fact, we are losing more than €3 billion every year by keeping our fish stocks in a depleted state. If stocks were allowed to recover, this could support more than 30,000 direct jobs in the fishing sector. In a context of economic crisis, with high levels of unemployment and cuts in public services, it is unacceptable to settle for the lowest political denominator and to allow this drain on resources and economic benefits to continue for the coming years.

Of particular concern is the fact that ministers have further delayed and weakened the goal of fish stock recovery. Instead of committing to meet the internationally agreed target of recovering fish populations to sustainable levels of abundance by 2015, ministers merely agreed to reduce fishing pressure progressively by 2015, where possible, and 2020 at the latest. This would allow overfishing to continue for the next decade and makes actual stock recovery an unspecified and distant target.

Perhaps the best measure of how irresponsibly weak the Council approach is, was delivered within a week of ministers adopting the text, when governments from around the world met at the Rio Summit for Sustainability and agreed to intensify (not slacken) their efforts to recover fish populations by 2015.

The ministers' unwillingness to apply the basic rules of sustainability in their pursuit of short-term economic interests at the expense of long-term prosperity is what has pushed fisheries deeper into crisis in the first place. We urge all Members of the European Parliament to make use of your newly gained powers on fisheries policy to break with this cycle and reject the Council's approach.

You have been entrusted with the task of fixing Europe's broken fisheries policy! We ask you to stop the overexploitation of our seas, improve fisheries governance and to support environmentally sustainable, low-impact fishing methods, in order to reduce damage to marine ecosystems, save fish and fishing jobs.

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Key weaknesses of the Council approach that should be addressed:

Stock recovery:

Rather than set the goal of recovering the abundance of fish in the sea by 2015, which would require immediate reductions in the catch rates for most species, the Council merely agreed to reach sustainable catch levels “by 2015, where possible, and 2020 at the latest” (new GA Art. 2.2). This means overfishing can continue for another decade, pushing the stock recovery goal into a more distant future.

Moreover, the Council wants to allow for two significant exemptions from the rule of sustainable exploitation:

- in mixed fisheries sustainable exploitation rates would only apply to “significant stocks”, without further clarification what significant actually means (new GA Art. 9.3); and
- where stocks are shared with third countries, exploitation rates would be set on the basis of consultations with these countries, casting some doubt over whether catch limits will be sufficiently reduced (new GA Art. 2.2bis).

In short, the Council is saying that it will continue to set quotas above the sustainable level for some or all of the species in coming years.

The new CFP should not endorse a continuation of overfishing. Therefore, we ask you to ensure that the Parliament’s position calls for the recovery of all fish stocks by 2015. We further insist that the international target of 2015 should be respected and that further delays till 2020 are unacceptable. In mixed fisheries, the status of the most vulnerable species should determine the scope of stock recovery measures.

Moreover, we urge you to ensure that the new CFP recognises that stock recovery and sustainable catch limits are the prerequisite for ensuring long-term social and economic prosperity.

Integration of environmental considerations in fisheries management:

The Council approach fails to set out specific enough obligations to ensure that fisheries management contributes to the achievement of good environmental status in the marine environment (new GA Art. 2.4), as is required by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. Moreover, the Council has deprioritised measures that would protect species and habitats from the impacts of fishing and has fallen short of reigning in the much needed shift to sustainable, low-impact fishing practices.

We call on you to ensure that those fishermen who have the least impact on the environment and add the most value to local fishing communities are given priority access to fisheries resources. We further urge you to ensure that the impacts of fishing on marine species and habitats are minimised and, where possible, eliminated.



Fishing capacity management

On a positive note, the Council has agreed to reinstall annual reporting requirements on the development of fishing capacity and has acknowledged that where overcapacity is identified as a problem, action plans should be put in place to eliminate overcapacity (new GA Art. 35). Also commendable is the Council's approach on transferable fishing concessions (TFCs), which would no longer be a mandatory instrument to manage access to quotas, but one that Member States can choose to use (new GA Art. 27).

The concept of action plans to reduce overcapacity overlaps with text tabled in the Parliament. However, the type of action to be taken should be elaborated further and be complimented by clear timelines for achieving a balanced fleet. Moreover, the action plans should ensure a reduction as well as a qualitative change in fishing capacity, favouring those fishing methods that minimise impacts on the environment and maximise social benefits, including employment.

External dimension

The Council has weakened the focus of the section on external dimension:

- shifting away from a commitment to respect the surplus rule and therefore end overfishing under new Sustainable Fisheries Agreements, to making it the expressed goal of the Union to exploit, albeit sustainably, the surplus in the waters of third countries (new GA Art. 41.2); and
- defending the status quo, by continuing the fishing activities of EU fleets and ensuring access to a catch that is "commensurate" with the interests of the EU fleet (new GA Art. 41.2), even though this fleet in many cases is already taking more than is sustainable.

Commendable, on the other hand, is the agreement to add a clause on the respect for democratic principles and human rights to each fisheries agreement (new GA Art. 41.5) and to make ex-ante and ex-post evaluations of the agreements available in good time (new GA Art. 41.6).

We urge you to ensure that the EU promotes measures to recover and maintain fish populations at levels above those that can produce sustainable catches, and, where it has agreements with third countries, limits itself to exploiting a share of the surplus that is consistent with achieving this stock recovery goal.

Discard ban:

The Council significantly weakened the provisions for a discard ban, by excluding certain fisheries from the provisions, allowing for derogations from the ban and by shifting the timelines of implementation (new GA Art.15).

We urge you to stand firm on support for a speedy introduction of a discard ban and encourage you to refine the proposed provisions to ensure that the discard ban and multiannual plans serve to increase selectivity and minimise and, where possible, eliminate by-catch problems.



Regionalised multiannual fisheries management:

The Council approach sets out a new procedure for regionalised consultation and co-operation between governments that share interests in a particular fishery and relevant stakeholders. Member States are encouraged to develop recommendations for conservation and technical measures in their shared fisheries and to submit these jointly to the European Commission, which would then adopt measures on the basis of those proposed (new GA Art.15).

However, the Council has not seized the opportunity to improve the text proposals for multiannual plans of the Commission. Nor have ministers set a clear timetable for the delivery and implementation of multiannual plans. Multiannual plans are central to delivering sustainable fisheries management. Yet they become meaningless, if they are delivered too late. NGO therefore urge you to ensure that clear deadlines are being set for the delivery and implementation of multiannual plans.

Enforcement and conditionality for access to fisheries funds:

The Council significantly weakened provisions that would make EU financial assistance towards Member States conditional upon compliance with the rules of the CFP (new GA Art. 50). Likewise, rules on conditionality of funding for operators have also been weakened (new GA Art. 51).

Far too often, EU funds have been abused and given to Member States and operators that have failed to comply with the rules of the CFP. We urge you to ensure that this misuse of public money will no longer be tolerated.

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