

CFP Reform 2002



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COMMISSION ACTION PLAN TO REDUCE DISCARDS OF FISH (COM(2002)656)

Introduction

Discarding – throwing part of the catch overboard – is a practice that occurs in virtually all fisheries, except possibly industrial fisheries. Since most of the unwanted catch is thrown back dead or dying, it is clearly a waste of resources. The extent of the problem varies greatly but can reach 75 per cent in some fisheries.

The European Commission has now presented an Action Plan to tackle discarding. The plan provides a general overview of the magnitude of the problem and an analysis of the reasons behind this wasteful practice, and indicates some of its biological and economic consequences. Finally, it presents a number of possibilities for reducing discarding in the future, together with a three-year timetable for implementation.

As a Commission Action Plan, it contains no firm commitments to new EU measures; it does, however, list a number of areas where modifications to the CFP might be sought, eg by revising technical measures, as well as other initiatives that can be taken forward by the Commission itself, including studies.

The extent of the problem

In the Communication, discards are defined as fish (including crustaceans, molluscs and other commercially exploited fisheries) that have been brought on board a fishing vessel through fishing activities and are subsequently thrown back into the sea. This definition does not cover other, non-commercial species commonly brought in as bycatch in certain fisheries, such as brittlestars, sea urchins, and marine mammals.

The quantities of bycatch and discards vary across fisheries, but overall are considerable. Currently, bycatch and discards are not reported by fishing vessels. Most estimates of the size of the problem therefore come from scientific sampling programmes, some of which have been ongoing since the 1930s. Since bycatch and discards are not routinely reported, they cannot be appropriately included in the scientific stock assessments, making predictions on fishing mortality and future catches less certain. Through different sampling schemes, however, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) makes estimates, especially for demersal stocks, that are incorporated in routine stock assessments. In the demersal whitefish fisheries, for example, the level of discards seems to range between 5 and 63 per cent by weight or 15 and 80 per cent by number. Discards of cod are thought to be lower than those of haddock and whiting.

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Other estimates can be found in Commission or Member State funded studies, often focused on a particular fishery. In the Mediterranean, trawl fisheries appear to discard a minimum of 20 per cent of their catch and up to between 40 and 70 per cent. In some cases, discards have been extremely high. A study of plaice in the north Atlantic showed that the contents of some hauls were discarded in their entirety.

Reasons for discarding

For fishermen, there are both economic and legal reasons for discarding part of the catch. It is clear that some discarding practices are driven by current EU fisheries policy; notably individuals under the legal minimum landing sizes and catches in excess of allowed percentage catch compositions, bycatch limits or quotas are routinely discarded.

Economic reasons for discarding include 'high grading', where lower value catches, such as smaller individuals or species that fetch a lower price, are discarded to save storage capacity for catches of higher commercial value. Sometimes there is simply no storage space left at the end of a fishing trip, and part of the catch is discarded, and on long trips the catch may deteriorate to a point when it is thrown overboard.

Environmental consequences of discarding

Discarding can have a negative impact on conservation as well. If large numbers of juvenile fish are caught and then discarded, it will affect the replenishment of that stock. This is a particular concern with stocks already heavily overfished, such as cod, hake and other whitefish, and will directly affect future profitability in those fisheries. There is therefore no doubt that it is in everybody's interest to reduce this wasteful practice.

In addition, the ecological effects of returning discarded biomass to the sea are poorly understood, but some species of seabirds are thought to benefit from the practice. The key problem, however, is the fact that fishing vessels take up all this unwanted catch in the first place. Whether it is then used in any way or thrown back makes little difference in terms of species conservation. With the exception of a few species, most will already be dead or dying when discarded.

Proposed measures

According to the Action Plan, reducing the level of discards in Community fisheries is a key element in achieving a responsible and sustainable fishery. A combination of approaches is suggested to resolve this complex problem. Fishing effort reduction is to be a key element, since this should lead to a general reduction in catches, including unwanted catches. Several possible actions to improve the selectivity of gear and change fishing practices are also listed, such as adjustments to mesh sizes and landing sizes, area and real-time closures, and voluntary actions by fishermen to leave areas with high levels of juveniles.



As the depleted European fish stocks consist predominantly of young fish, catches are mainly made up of small fish. The Commission is to engage in discussions with Member States to identify the most problematic fisheries and areas, to enable appropriate prioritisation between actions. The Commission also wants to explore the possible use of low value fish now discarded, and investigate the possibility of implementing a discard ban in 2006.

Reducing fishing effort

For seriously depleted stocks, it will be crucial to reduce fishing effort and apply appropriate technical measures to enable stock recovery. Effort limitations will be a key element in EU fisheries management, particularly as part of future recovery and management plans. In addition, the fishing industry will be asked to voluntarily depart from fishing grounds when catches contain high quantities of small fish, since a legal requirement to do so would be difficult to enforce.

Technical measures

Several different types of technical measures are proposed to improve selectivity and minimise catches of unwanted species and undersized fish.

- **the structure of nets:** a range of selectivity measures is foreseen which, in many cases, will build on existing technical measures. The Commission also proposes more research into gear selectivity, as well as consultation with the industry, scientists and national authorities.
- **minimum landing sizes:** minimum landing sizes will be reviewed, and to avoid catches and discards of undersized fish, will be considered together with gear changes to increase selectivity in order to ensure consistency.
- **catch composition rules:** the rules on catch composition, which currently lead to compulsory discarding, will be reviewed in relation to defined mesh sizes.
- **closed areas and real-time closures:** the Commission will consider extending existing closed areas as well as establishing new ones.

Possible discard ban

The Commission will consult Member States, the sector and Norway on the possibilities of a discard ban. Pilot projects will be put into place to test different aspects and a proposal may be developed in 2005 for implementation in 2006.

Making better use of low-value fish

Other potential uses of discarded fish, including direct and indirect human consumption, will be investigated together with the possible consequences for the species concerned. There are examples of such practices, such as Community vessels in third-country waters fishing for tuna landing their non-tuna catches in developing countries where it is used for human consumption. The Commission will initiate a study by March 2003 to explore possibilities.



Other possible measures

The Commission also puts forward a number of other suggestions, such as the possibility of reducing discards by establishing bycatch quotas, against which Member States with no quota for the species concerned but fishing rights for other species would be allowed to land limited quantities, or setting multi-species TACs for a group of species rather than individual TACs.

Pilot projects using observers to examine the selectivity of gear, the catch composition and the volume of discards will be encouraged through financial incentives for fishermen, in the hope of promoting innovative fishing practises designed to reduce discarding. The fishermen would be at liberty to engage in any fishing activity which they believe would reduce discards while maintaining an economically viable catch. In other pilot schemes involving observers, all potential discards would be returned to shore. General monitoring of discards will also be strengthened and extended to fisheries not currently covered.

Conclusions

The Commission has set out a range of different possibilities to reduce discards, together with some dates for implementation. These are based on a thorough analysis of the issues and suggest a serious commitment to tackle this problem. It is, however, puzzling that the Commission has chosen to focus on bycatch and discards of commercial species only, while bycatch of non-commercial species is addressed in a separate Action Plan to integrate environmental protection requirements into the CFP (COM(2002)186). Both types of bycatch and discarding are undesirable and are the results of excessive fishing pressure, unselective fishing gear or imprecise fishing methods. Many of the solutions are likely to be the same and, in the spirit of environmental integration, it can be argued that the two problems would be best tackled together.

Perhaps less significantly so, but still surprising, is the fact that the Action Plan focuses more on discards than on the root cause of discards, which is the fact that unwanted species and individuals are caught in the first place. More weight should have been attached to actions reducing bycatch through gear changes and other changes in fishing practises. In addition, reporting of all catches regardless of whether they are retained on board or not should be made a requirement, in order for fisheries scientists to finally get figures for actual catches to be included in stock assessments. If non-commercial species were also included in a new reporting requirement, this would enable the Commission and the Community to implement the ecosystem-based approach now lodged in the objectives of the CFP in a more effective and informed way.