

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council

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Advisory Council agrees a major breakthrough on cod discards

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council (NSRAC) has agreed a move which could see the end of the controversial practice of discarding marketable cod caught in the North Sea.

It has become clear during the year there is a mismatch between the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for cod and what is being caught on the fishing grounds, given current fishing practices.

The combination of an increased abundance of cod, especially from the 2005 year class, and small quotas for fishers, is resulting in significant discarding of marketable fish.

Discarding is a waste of a very valuable resource; it is retarding the recovery of North Sea cod stocks and it undermines the reputation of the fishing industry, fisheries science and the Common Fisheries Policy.

The issue of discards is one of the most serious challenges in seeking sustainable fisheries and reducing them is part of the “ecosystem approach” to fisheries management.

The NSRAC has been very concerned about this situation for some time and predicted last year that heavy discarding would take place in the North Sea during 2008.

The council has now considered several options for reducing discards which have come forward from different fishing fleets.

At its Executive Committee meeting in York, the council accepted a proposal which asks the European Union and Norway to increase TAC for cod in return for the implementation by the fishing fleets of measures to reduce discards and avoid the capture of cod.

The European Commission recently suggested the implementation of a policy to reduce unwanted by-catch and eliminate discards in European fisheries.

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The proposal agreed by the RAC is that there should be a sufficient increase in the TAC consistent with the scientific advice, to reduce or eliminate discards of marketable cod in return for a broad suite of cod avoidance measures, which will ensure that fishing mortality does not increase.

If executed appropriately, the overall effect of the measures should be to reduce the overall amount of cod killed, whilst allowing the industry to land more.

However such a proposal requires sophisticated use of gears, a modified fishing strategy and full compliance by the fleet.

Those measures will include conservation credits (incentives to reduce cod mortality), real time closures of fishing grounds to prevent the capture of juvenile or spawning fish, the use of more selective fishing gears and the adoption of individual vessel cod avoidance plans.

Technical measures could include the use of fishing gears like the “eliminator trawl”, which allows effective fishing for haddock and whiting whilst eliminating cod from the catch.

There is a commitment to strictly monitor catches and discards through observer programmes and the use of on board cameras.

If the TAC for North Sea cod is set towards the upper range of ICES projections for catches in 2009, it will be incumbent upon the fishing industry and member states to ensure the establishment of extensive accompanying measures to reduce or eliminate discards of marketable cod.

NSRAC chairman Hugo Andersson said: “While the NSRAC is committed to reducing discards it is important to recognize that there are constraints on what can be achieved – the targets must be challenging but they must also be attainable.

“Some discards are easier to reduce than others and fishery by fishery solutions will be necessary. Reducing discards should be considered as an important factor when drafting all fisheries regulations.”

NSRAC delegates recognize that the successful implementation of this approach depends on the various fleets and member states meeting their obligations to implement effective cod avoidance measures.

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They also stress the need for a proper evaluation of the effectiveness of this new approach. This will require regular reporting, peer control and cooperation between all those involved, including controlling authorities in member states.

“In the event of a failure to deliver on cod avoidance and continuing evidence of widespread discarding, we would recognize the imperative to rapidly introduce secondary measures,” added Mr Andersson.

-Ends-

Notes to editors:

The NSRAC is the formal channel for stakeholders to provide suggestions and advice to the EC and the Council of Ministers on fishing in the North Sea.

The Regional Advisory Councils, of which there are six operational, are a key element of the 2002 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

They aim for better engagement of the people the policy affects and for more regionally-focused fisheries management.

The NSRAC meeting in York was attended by representatives of the European fishing industry and environmental Non Governmental Organisations.

Countries involved in the NSRAC are: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

These stakeholder-led forums give fishermen and other interested parties, including environmental organisations and consumer groups, a say in the way the CFP operates. They are the formal channel through which stakeholders can give suggestions and advice to the European Commission and the Council of Ministers.

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