

Plaice and sole in the North Sea: a long-term plan for healthier stocks and economic returns

Today, the European Commission adopted a proposal on a long-term management plan for plaice and sole fisheries in the North Sea which, according to scientists are fished at unsustainable levels. Conservation and economic viability are closely linked, and the management plan for North Sea plaice and sole is designed to gradually adjust the fishing on these stocks to achieve greater catches, larger and more stable stocks of fish in the sea and more profitable fisheries. The plan therefore defines target levels of fishing mortality (measure of fish killed by fishing) of 0.3 for plaice and 0.2 for sole. These are values which, according to scientific advice, will allow high yields in the long term, reduce discarding, and allow a reduced biological risk to the fish stocks. The tools to achieve these objectives are the same as those in the other long-term plans already in place. Fishing mortality will be reduced by 10% year-on-year until the target levels have been reached, while annual variations in TACs will be kept within 15% up or down. Other measures will involve the management of fishing days and specific control and monitoring measures. This proposal, which follows extensive consultations with stakeholders, will restore the fishery to long-term biological and economic viability and result in reduced impact on the environment while avoiding major disruptions to the industry.

Joe Borg, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, commented: "This proposal aims to optimise the economic returns of the sector through securing the sustainability of the plaice and sole fisheries concerned. It also consolidates our long-term approach which allows for gradual implementation of better fisheries management".

According to the most recent scientific advice from the [International Council for the Exploration of the Sea \(ICES\)](#), the stocks of both plaice and sole in the North Sea are currently overfished. Plaice, in particular, is in poor biological condition, to an extent that risks affecting its reproductive ability. A very large proportion of the plaice caught are discarded. At current fishing levels, the sole stock is expected to fall outside safe biological limits in 2007.

Sole fisheries provide most of the income in the North Sea beam trawl fishery, but result in large by-catches of plaice and whiting, most of which are discarded. Scientific studies show that under better stock conditions, the same quantity of sole could be caught with roughly half the current fishing effort. This would be good for the associated species subject to high discard rates – in

particular, for plaice – and it would be good for the economics of the fishery, particularly since the fleets concerned consume high quantities of fuel whose cost has risen so much in recent years.

The Commission therefore proposes to address both these issues by introducing a long-term management plan for sole and plaice which will gradually reduce fishing mortality on sole from its current level of 0.35 to 0.2, and on plaice from a current rate of 0.58 to 0.3. Total allowable catches will not be varied by more than 15% from year to year, in either direction, in order to minimise short-term economic disruption. Limitations on fishing effort (days at sea) will be set in relation with the fishing possibilities agreed each year.

Developed after extensive consultations with Member States and with all stakeholders, in particular through the North Sea Regional Advisory Council, this new management plan further demonstrates the Commission's dual commitment to effective conservation on the one hand, and to a profitable fishing industry on the other. Following the introduction of a recovery plan for North Sea cod in 2004, the plaice and sole management plan represents another major step in helping to restore the North Sea ecosystem so that both the fish stocks and the commercial fisheries depending on them may thrive in the future as they have done in the past.