



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

MEMO

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Better protection for deep-sea fish stocks and their habitats : Questions and Answers

1. Which fisheries are concerned by the measures proposed and which fisheries are not concerned by those measures? Which regions and fishing industries are concerned?

Vessels directly involved are mainly French, Spanish and Portuguese. These vessels operating in deep-sea fisheries are not only large trawlers off the West of the British Islands (Hatton and Rockall banks) but also carrying out small-scale fisheries with longlines, which do not use bottom trawls, in some of the EU's outermost regions (e.g. Azores, Madeira, Canaries). The big trawlers are mainly based in Brittany and Normandy (France) and in Galicia, Asturias and the Basque Country (Spain).

The Commission believes that the overall economic importance of deep-sea catches is small: The 34.334 tonnes of deep-sea species landed from the North-East Atlantic (2008) represents only about 1% of the overall landings (3.563.711 tonnes) from the North-East Atlantic (Data on deep-sea catches from Joint Research Centre). In the regional context, the picture might be different but the impact of a phase-out of bottom trawls and bottom-set gillnets remains limited. For example, in the case of France, the French government and their industry reviewed two years ago the state of the activity and estimated that about 180 jobs are linked to the deep sea fishing vessels, mostly trawlers, although those trawlers also operate in other fisheries. About 200 fish mongers are specialised in deep-sea fish. The four ports with more activity linked to deep-sea fisheries are Boulogne sur Mer, Lorient, Concarneau and Le Guilvinec. The Commission proposal would be of very limited impact nationally, although more sensitive at a local level (Brittany).

2. Is this initiative the prelude of a total bottom trawling banning in EU waters?

This is certainly not the intention of the Commission. Deep-sea fisheries, both targeted and by-catch will be defined in base of the overall catch weight per day of a mixture of species precisely listed. The only segment to be phased out is the targeted fisheries. Other commercial fisheries will be not affected. In fact there are species that are mainly fished by trawling, including Norway lobster, with high economic value.

3. Which efforts are already underway to research and manage deep sea fisheries?

The EU is financing a project ([Deepfishman](#)) under its research framework programme that aims to provide a reliable assessment of the main deep-sea species. The efforts made by the industry to collect more detailed data are already paying and the expectations are for better scientific advice for the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea this year.

In addition, the Commission continues to research and testing for better fishing techniques with sustainability as the end objective. Under the EU Data Collection Framework, a study has been commissioned to support research into gear improvements that would contribute to a more sustainable exploitation of deep-sea resources while reducing the negative impact on the ecosystem. The study is developed in cooperation with the fishing industry and involves the use of observers on board commercial fishing vessels.

In parallel, the Commission is compiling very detailed data from vessel's satellite locators and crossing them with data on catches in order to draw up a more precise footprint of the activities of these fleets. This will provide a clear picture of where these fisheries take place for the different fleets involved, and will also help scientists know with ever more precision where and how the fish stocks evolve.

4. Why do trawls cause concern in deep sea fisheries and how can they be replaced by more environmentally friendly fishing techniques? How about bottom-set gillnets?

Bottom trawling may cause more harm to vulnerable deep-sea species and habitats than other fishing methods. Further concerns have been expressed that bottom trawling heavily impact the deep-water benthic fauna, particularly the reef-forming corals¹. It can be one of the reasons for the decline of cold-water and other habitat forming taxa². Significant impact on certain habitats and ecosystems next to the sea floor is greater due to the fact that this fishing gear is dragged along the bottom of the oceans. On the other hand, bottom trawling involves high levels of unwanted catches: the so-called "by-catches". The estimated rates of undesired catch in observed trawl fisheries are on average between 20-30 % in weight (ICES 2010). The variety of species discarded by trawlers depends mainly on the fishing ground and the season. For instance, in the Western slope of the Hatton Bank, experimental fishing by trawlers targeting roundnose grenadiers and smoothheads, discards are mainly composed of grenadiers and deep water sharks³.

Bottom-set gillnets are nets that are "planted" on the seabed and left static to entangle the catches. The vessels then return after some time to retrieve them and haul the catch. Their impact on the environment is felt in terms of the unwanted catches they take and on the cases where they get lost or abandoned, and continue to ghost-fish for very long periods of time. They are already under a general prohibition of use in depths of more than 600 m. The proposal tabled here basically consolidates the rules in their respect.

¹ Fosså et al., 2002

² Gage et al., 2005

³ Duran Muñoz et al., 2012

The Commission is ready to work with the industry and Member States to facilitate a transition towards more selective methods or towards change of fishing gear targeting deep sea species and/or the redeployment of the vessels affected to other fisheries that may be able to accommodate them. Together with the national authorities primarily responsible, the Commission is ready to explore possible financial support from EU funds to ease the impact of permanent cessations of deep-sea activity and the potential loss of jobs (e.g. by redirecting jobs to other fisheries).

5. If the fishermen have been responsible in contributing better data and as a result the science improves, and if indeed there is a chance even to fish more than in the past, does it make sense to propose phasing deep trawling out?

There is consensus among the scientific community that many of the deep-water fish stocks in the North-East Atlantic have declined and are now outside safe biological limits⁴. However, the information on the state of most deep water fish stocks is still limited or poor despite recent initiatives to expand sampling and data analyses. These efforts should continue and in some cases be expanded. It will take a long term commitment to ultimately improve assessments of deep-water fisheries.

The answer to the question is yes, it does. In 2012, ICES has for the first time implemented an approach which enables quantitative advice to be given in data poor situations, based on the precautionary approach and where possible also considering MSY. If some – very few – stocks were to look like doing better under improved science then of course the fishermen can see the reward of their efforts.

However, this argument does not take away the good sense of incentivising the fishing industry to harvest such species in a more sustainable way, and for that, one has to look not just at the levels of catches, but to the impacts that fishing gear leaves behind. If there is more fish in the sea for some of these stocks – again just very few of them – it is also thanks to the limits that have been imposed on catches over the recent years. What we need now is to help industry redirect itself to means of harvesting that are environmentally sounder. The possibility to increase catches safely for some stock, if science says it is possible, is an opportunity for the trawling fleets to have better economic returns in the short term. This means a unique chance to restructure into lower-impact gears for the longer term.

A combination of stocks in better shape and cleaner fishing methods, with much less catch of unwanted species and much less impact on the deep sea habitat is a winning recipe for the future.

More information:

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

⁴ Campbell et al., 2011