

Debate on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy

[Extracted from the report of the NWWRAC General Assembly - 19th of November 2008]

1. Presentation from the Commission

Poul Dengbol, representative of the European Commission, addressed the meeting by stating that because this was an initial "brainstorming" session prior to the formal consultation phase there would be no official responses or opinions from the Commission for the time being.

Mr. Dengbol hoped that the meeting would serve as forum for dialogue in order to identify the key issues that could help pinpoint the aims that should be the most central and measures that would be more suited to the implementation of a future CFP in 2012. He also announced that the Commission's Green Book would be published in April and that a consultation procedure would be set up to obtain the opinions of the RAC and stakeholders in general throughout 2009.

With regard to the underlying principles of the future CFP, he stressed that a results-based approach could prevail over the current trend of centralized management and detailed technical "micro-regulation", which has been proven to be discouraging and inefficient in terms of the compliance of fishermen because of its complexity. Furthermore, the scope of powers could be more clearly defined in the decision-making process for the adoption of policies and implementation of regulations so that only strategic issues and standards are decided in Council or in co-decision while technical implementation decisions would be delegated to lower levels. This would promote a more long term focus in the policy. However, the representative of the Commission made it clear that these were only preliminary considerations and that it would be necessary to strike a balance between the two aspects (regulating minimums and technical micro-regulation).

On the issue of regionalization, the RACs can play a crucial role as advisers to Member States implementing the policy regionally.

In a bid to encourage the maintenance of a responsible and sustainable fishing industry, the Commission agreed that it should have a series of rights but that it must also have unavoidable duties or responsibilities. One issue that needs to be discussed on this subject is whether the European Commission should reverse the burden of proof toward the fishing industry. Other points discussed were the need to combine social needs and make them compatible with the search for economic efficiency and reflection on the obligation of upholding the principle of relative stability in the 21st century.

The full version of this presentation can be found in the Meetings section of the website.

2. General discussion on the revision of the CFP

* In the members' turn to speak, the following conclusions were drawn:

- There was a difference of opinion among members of the fishing industry over the relevance of maintaining or eliminating the relative stability criterion seeking greater economic efficiency based on the free transfer of fishing quotas or rights to the fishing industry.
- Positive incentives are needed for the industry as the way to secure correct management of fishing resources. Reversing the burden of proof toward fishermen without first creating incentives for compliance was seen as negative. Therefore, it is essential to structure this policy around the provision of real incentives.
- It was noted that the TAC and Quotas system has been proven to be ineffective and has not solved problems with the conservation of resources. It was asked whether the restructuring of the CFP could eliminate this inefficient system of the distribution of fishing rights. The new CFP could then be based on a system of fishing effort that combines technical conservation measures with market measures (marketing, control of imports, etc).
- It was considered necessary to find new recipes or instruments, such as fisheries management adapted to the fishing effort of each area (based on fleet volume, type of gear, horsepower, etc). Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the social effects that such measures could have on the local maritime economies.
- We should not forget that the future CFP will use a management approach based on ecosystems and that we must assess all of the aspects integrating this concept (fishing species, birds, coastal areas, human activities, etc). Actions for responsible fishing and the socio-economic diversification of fishing activities should be made a priority in the lines of action of the CFP.
- It was pointed out that the reduction in fishing possibilities for species subject to the TAC and Quotas system that have reached levels of overexploitation could cause problems by moving the fishing effort to other areas and species not subject to this system (such as sea bass, sea bream or the scallop), thus damaging coastal or small-scale fishing areas to the advantage of more powerful industrial fleets.
- ICES and the European Commission should assess and expressly acknowledge examples of good management for some stocks, whether or not these are subject to TAC.
- It is held that the current vision of the fishing effort system is too simplistic, given that its calculation is based only on the horsepower of the engine and length of the vessel; in the case of boats with fishing gear such as deepwater gillnets, other variables such as the length and number of nets are more important than horsepower.

*** The representative of the Commission, Poul Dengbol, responded to the issues raised by the members:**

- Overexploited stocks: the figure of 80% of Community stocks at levels of overexploitation only includes Community – and Norwegian – stocks for which the Commission has stock assessments.

- Scope of application of the CFP: it was explained that it should be considered whether a CFP could have different regimes for industrial and coastal fishing communities and activities to enable us to deal separately with economic efficiency and social issues.

- Relative stability and transferable fishing rights: he stated that the discussion on the revision of the criterion for relative stability is necessary if we wish to have a mature and in-depth debate covering all aspects for improving efficiency in the next CFP. Regarding the possibility of granting transferable fishing rights in the European market, he confirmed that only the Netherlands out of all Member States has declared itself in favour of this measure so far.

- Industry incentives: the question of which should come first, incentives or a show of results from the industry, is a case of the classic conundrum of the "chicken and the hen." This is a key issue that needs to be discussed in detail during the consultation procedure and concrete proposals on how to link the two concepts are required. In all events, the unique context and features of mixed fisheries should be analysed as part of the future debate.

- Micro-management and level of detail in regulations: the consultation procedure does not seek to create general uniform measures but rather ones that are sensitive and adapted to local conditions → the representative of the Commission recognised that many current problems are due to "micro-management" and excessive detail in the regulations. It is not therefore essential to have a single system for all fisheries or even a single system specifically for fisheries that are economically more efficient. One possibility would be to devise different regionalised management systems in a bid to obtain strong, healthy populations.

- Stocks not subject to TACs or Quotas: it may be advisable to offer greater flexibility to species and stocks without Community regulation and adopt a results-based approach, granting a degree of discretion to members of the fishing industry to find their own solutions (in the case of the scallop, for example, allowing them to use different minimum ring sizes).

- Socio-economic diversification: group reflection is required from all parties involved in the consultation process; in this regard, we need to ask ourselves how much structural funds could help us reach this objective. However, we need to think about whether the issue is really exclusively limited to the scope of the CFP or whether it should form part of a more general topic linked to other policies (economic, etc). The search for solutions and alternatives will require active contributions from the RACs.