

The future of the Common Fisheries Policy

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Summary

The Common Fisheries Policy needs "root and branch" reform to bring lasting changes to Europe's fishing sector, including devolving more decision-making to the local level, involving the industry and other stakeholders, and providing fishermen with incentives to follow the rules, speakers told an EPC Policy Dialogue organised with the support of the Pew Environment Group. The European Commission's Green Paper suggests reforms designed to create an ecologically-sustainable marine environment that generates healthy incomes and supplies nutritious, sustainably-harvested food.

Full Report

Joe Borg, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, said the - much-criticised - Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) needs "root and branch" reform to bring real and lasting changes to Europe's fishing sector.

The current situation is "less than perfect":

- most fish stocks in EU waters are over-fished, upsetting the ecological balance;
- catches are so low that Europe imports two-thirds of its fish;
- prices are 'sticky' (do not respond to supply and demand);
- fishermen's incomes are falling;
- too many vessels are pursuing too few fish.

These weaknesses have been further exposed by the global downturn, and must be remedied to create a marine environment that generates a healthy income and supplies nutritious, sustainably-harvested food.

To stimulate consultation on CFP reform (to be completed in 2012), the Commission has produced a Green Paper which stresses the need to uphold the principle of ecological sustainability, which will then trigger economic and social sustainability. The fisheries sector must be efficient, cost-effective, and easy to administer, moving from micro-management at the top to more local decision-making with a stronger regional dimension.

It must integrate other sea-related policies concerning climate change and coastal development through an Integrated Maritime Policy that strengthens industry involvement, is market- and consumer-driven, and provides sustainable fishing. It will take up best practices outside the EU, such as Norway's ban on discarding fish, and the industry must rid itself of practices like bottom trawling and unregulated fishing.

The reform will have a global dimension, taking into account bilateral and international agreements.

There is no doubt that Europe's fisheries have a future, but we need to work together to shape it, making reform a "quantum leap" for fisheries policies, said the Commissioner.



Uta Bellion, Director of the European Marine Programme, Pew Environment Group, said our oceans are of “fundamental importance to society” and if action is not taken now, they will be destroyed by over-fishing and chemical pollution.

In Europe, people “talk-the-talk” of being environmentally aware and take steps to improve the environment, but not to alter fisheries’ policy. Europe is an important global player, with some of the richest seas and the biggest fishing fleets in the world, but one of the worst records of over-fishing.

Given its size, the EU plays an important role in regional fisheries management and Pew sees CFP reform as an “historic opportunity” to stop over-fishing and improve the industry globally, provided there is:

- a shared understanding that the *status quo* is not an option, as the economic viability of the sector is threatened, particularly with fishing “lower down the food chain”;
- a shared sense of the need to prioritise environmental sustainability to ensure long-term abundant fish stocks, with a brake on over-fishing and fishing gear that jeopardises the marine environment;
- a shared appreciation that decision-making in fisheries management must change as current meetings to set annual fishing limits are “a sick joke”.

If and when the Lisbon Treaty is ratified, it must focus on strategic issues, handing down decision-making to other bodies, and the Common Fisheries Policy must not be watered down. Ms Bellion said this was an “unprecedented opportunity to get people involved”, as they want a “sea change” in fisheries policies.

Barrie Deas, Vice-President of *Europêche*, described the Green Paper as “a landmark”, a turning point for the EU to discard its centralised “command and control” model of governance which has brought it into disrepute. The European Court of Auditors’ report, which said the costs of managing fisheries outweigh the revenue generated, was the tipping point; and the current CFP has too many technical rules and stifles the industry.

Experience has shown that reinforcing centralised control regulations does not work and does not deliver, said Mr Deas. The Green Paper on CFP reform could signal a positive transformation by decentralising the CFP and transferring decision-making from the centre to the regions and the industry itself.

He hoped the reformed CFP would:

- have an overarching guiding set of principles at EU level, but avoid detailed prescriptions for local action;
- transfer decision-making to regional bodies, which would define long-term management plans;
- replace the current micro-management with a high degree of self-management, leaving it to fishing and producer organisations to plan how to operate the fishing industry profitably and in an environmentally-friendly way.

The central issue is how the sector should be governed, as the structure of an “all-knowing authority figure” needs replacing with one in which the fishing industry governs itself.

Mike Neilson, Director of Marine Scotland, Scottish Government, thought public opinion and consumer buying patterns are driving the reforms to make fishing sustainable, and welcomed the Green Paper’s call for radical reform and returning the management of fisheries policies to Member States.

Scotland has 20% of the EU’s fishing waters and two-thirds of the UK’s fishing industry. The Scottish government is responsible for fisheries management and, with Commission support, is taking a new approach (with input from the industry and NGOs) that helps to preserve stocks and gives fishermen an incentive to “do the right thing”.



This 'cod recovery' approach is based on areas where there are large cod stocks and links the allocation of time fishermen can spend at sea directly with the conservation-friendly measures they adopt. This tough approach is bringing results, and one can draw a number of lessons:

- fisheries' management must encourage stewardship by the industry;
- decision-making must be pushed as far down the chain as possible and involve fishermen;
- incentives must be provided for fishermen to do the right thing;
- effective compliance must be ensured, and 'free riders' punished;
- develop regional decision-making within EU structures.

Regionalising governance of the sector makes it more sustainable, but this only works in EU waters if one accepts that the big decisions on quotas are agreed in international fora.

Mr Neilson felt the EPC panel largely held the same objectives: the need to focus on local decision-making, involve the industry and provide incentives for good behaviour.

Oda Sletnes, Norwegian Ambassador to the Europe Union, said Norway will benefit from a successful CFP reform, as the country shares important fish stocks with the EU.

Norway believes a healthy fisheries industry depends on healthy fish stocks, so for the last 15 years the Oslo has worked to achieve sustainability in fishing and preserve the ecosystem. There is now a better balance between resources and capacity, but this has meant having to reduce the size of the country's fishing fleet.

There is no short-term solution to maintaining resources at a sustainable level, said the Ambassador, and over-capacity must be tackled. In Norway this is achieved through different licensing systems and transferable fishing rights, with an effective market organisation in operation for the last 79 years.

There must be technical regulation, and the Commission has introduced bans on discarding fish, and should go further than this – setting catching- rather than landing- quotas for fish.

There must also be investment: for example, Norway has set up an effective sea-based enforcement and control system, with an active coastguard service that ensures national and EU vessels at sea abide by the country's regulations.

Commissioner Borg agreed the *status quo* was not an option and Europe's overcapacity must be discussed urgently and the technological improvements that allow over-fishing must be addressed.

Environmental sustainability must be priority, and "We must bite the bullet or there will be no future for fishing", he said. The 'top-down approach' cannot continue, and governance of the industry must change, moving control from the centre to the periphery. There is no dilemma between strengthening control measures and launching CFP reform - the CFP cannot be reformed without strong controls, at sea or on land.

Discussion

In response to remarks that ecological improvements to the sector are vital, Mr Deas said that while the sector could do better, it could carry on as it is. Ambassador Sletnes said it was important to harvest living resources at a sustainable level, based on an eco-system management approach.

On the question of compliance, Ambassador Sletnes said control has to be carried out at sea, while Mr Neilson believed controls should take place on land. Mr Deas believed controls would work best if industry set the rules and established an effective auditing system.



Asked about regionalisation, Ambassador Sletnes said that managing some fish stocks is a matter of international negotiations, although stocks in different seas such as the Mediterranean and North Sea need different approaches.

Pressed on the new policy, Commissioner Borg said it would avoid ideological arguments and take a more down-to-earth approach – one needs a healthy stock of fish, so tough decisions are needed now. Ms Bellion said there must be agreement on guiding principles before drawing up a policy. She also felt there should be a Minister of Fish, not of Fisheries.

Asked about sustainability, Mr Neilson said one needs a system that encourages good stewardship by the industry. Mr Deas was interested in practical measures to achieve this, and Ms Bellion believed the public was behind measures that preserve the ecosystem. Ambassador Sletnes said environmental sustainability brings economic viability.

On the question of fishing in international waters, Mr Borg wondered whether bilateral agreements are the way forward, but said one had to get the policy right within the EU first in order to tackle management of international waters.