Policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries

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The Committee on Fisheries has adopted an own initiative report by Carl **SCHLYTER** (Greens/EFA, SE) on a policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries. Members welcome the Commission's new attempt to stimulate discussion about this serious subject with a view to finally shifting the emphasis of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) so that the practice of discarding is virtually eliminated.

The report highlights the fact that unwanted by-catches and discards represent a serious environmental and economic problem, given that, on the one hand, they are responsible for the imbalance in certain ecosystems and that, on the other, they have been revealed to be the main cause of depleting stocks, some of which have a high commercial value, such as cod. According to estimates, discards account for between 7 million and 27 million tonnes per year, equivalent to one quarter of all fish and other species caught.

The committee believes that an effective means of reducing discards is the reduction in the overall fishing effort, accompanied by an improvement in selective measures. A decrease in fishing pressure would greatly benefit the sector, allowing depleted and over-fished stocks to recover and to become more productive, while making the sorting of the catch faster and easier. They therefore call for programmes aimed at reducing discards to be fully integrated into the overall Community policy for the sustainable management of fishing stocks.

The Commission, Member States and other stakeholders are encouraged to consider the use of positive incentives to get the industry to improve its fishing practices. In terms of incentives, the report outlines several possibilities:

- allowing more days at sea or otherwise increasing allowable fishing time for vessels using more selective gear;
- providing preferential access to areas that are closed to vessels not using selective gear;
- allowing vessels with more selective gear to fish during times when others not allowed.

Members are convinced that the industry would respond more favourably and with greater effect to a combination of positive and negative incentives, which should be given an opportunity to produce results. A discard ban should be adopted only after other types of negative incentives have been tried, including timed series of increases in mesh sizes, closed areas and others.

According to the parliamentary committee, the most logical approach would be to select a certain number of pilot fisheries on the basis of their volume of discards or with priority for species that are particularly vulnerable. The pilot projects should be selected in several areas in order to take into consideration the geographical diversity of Community fisheries. Each pilot project should also ensure the participation of a sufficient number of boats in order to also take into consideration the diversity of fish and to guarantee an effective exchange of information with others within the fishing framework.

Members consider there to be two possible candidate fisheries: the various beam trawl fisheries as well as those fisheries that catch and discard cod. While these pilot projects are proceeding, other fisheries should be evaluated for their discard rate.

The report also insists that priority be given to measures to be taken to deal with the types of fishing that create the most discards (for example, beam trawlers, prawn trawlers and those targeting whitefish).

Lastly, given that the TAC (total allowable catch) regulatory system is one of the major causes of discards, MEPs recommend that unwanted by-catch quotas be taken into account in the TACs and that all discharged unwanted by-catches be included in the allocated quotas.