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

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Carl **SCHLYTER** (Greens/EFA, SE) on a policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries. The resolution was adopted by adopted by 616 for and 22 against. Members welcome the Commission's new attempt to stimulate discussion about this serious subject with a view finally to shifting the emphasis of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) so that the practice of discarding is virtually eliminated. They stress the urgency of developing regulations to eliminate this environmentally unsustainable and immoral practice which in extreme cases can account for up to 90% of all fish caught.

Parliament 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.

Parliament believes that an effective means of reducing discards is the reduction in the overall fishing effort, accompanied by an improvement in selective measures. Reduced fishing pressure would provide significant benefits for the industry, allowing depleted stocks to recover and to become more productive, as well as saving time and effort in sorting the catch. Programmes to reduce discards must be fully integrated into the Community's overall policy for the sustainable management of fisheries.

The Commission, Member States and other stakeholders are encouraged to consider the use of incentives for the industry to improve its fishing practices. In terms of incentives, Parliament 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.

Members agree that the most sensible way to proceed is by choosing a number of pilot fisheries, based upon the quantity of discards produced or on the conservation status of the species involved. They emphasise the importance of the pilot projects being selected in several zones to represent the geographical variety of Community fisheries. Each pilot project must also involve a sufficient number of vessels to cover the diversity of the fishery as well as to ensure good information exchange with others in the fishery. Two possible candidates would be 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 resolution emphasises that if discard bans are adopted for specific fisheries, then in order to avoid perverse incentives such as creating a market for small fish or fish caught without quotas, such fish should not be marketed directly under any circumstances. The vessels may be compensated for the costs incurred in bringing to shore what they would have discarded. The fish involved could be used for fishmeal and fishoil production with any company utilising this facility contributing to a regionally organised compensation fund.

Lastly, Parliament points out that the TAC regulatory system is one of the major causes of discards and that measures must be adopted to prevent compulsory discards of unavoidably - caught species of legal size owing to the lack of a quota for those species. By-catch quotas should be incorporated into TACs and all landed by-catch should be counted against quota allocations. Should a fishery exceed its by-catch quota it would risk closure, just as an excess of juveniles is suggested to trigger real-time closures. This quota should then be gradually reduced to provide further incentives to improve gear selectivity.