More environmentally-friendly fishing methods

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PURPOSE : to propose ways in which the Community can further promote the use of environmentally-friendly fishing methods, particularly through technical conservation measures.

CONTENT : Environmentally-friendly fishing activities contribute to promoting sustainable economic and social conditions in the fishing sector. Fishermen need healthy fish stocks in a balanced environment. Any upset in this balance leads to the cycle of "boom and bust", which is unsustainable in economic terms. Within an integrated management approach there are three main objectives related to

conservation and the development of environmentally-friendly fishing:

- to reduce fishing effort to sustainable levels and keep it there : this is the single most important challenge for the CFP. It has been estimated that, on average, 20 million tonnes are discarded each year from marine capture fisheries worldwide. This corresponds to about 23% of the annual catches. There are no estimates available on the total amount of discards in Community waters. However, the total amount of fishery discards in the North Sea in 1990 was around 260, 000 tonnes of roundfish, 300, 000 tonnes of flatfish, 15, 000 tonnes of rays, skates and dogfish, and 150, 000 tonnes of bottom invertebrates. These discards correspond to about 22% of the total landings from the North Sea and are in line with the worldwide figures. Obviously the problem is not restricted to the North Sea. In other fishing areas of the Community the problem of discarding is probably of a similar order of magnitude. In spite of recent decisions of the Council fishing mortalities for most species are substantially higher than needed in order to take optimal yields from the stocks. For some demersal stocks fishing mortalities have recently been so high that the stocks are under threat of collapse; for many more, fishing mortality rates are judged to be unsustainable in the longer term.

- to optimise catches of target species and minimise unwanted catches. The aim is to make fishing operations as selective as possible, by retaining target specimens of the right species and size with minimum impact on other species or juvenile fish of the target species.

-to minimise the impact of fishing on habitats. The use of some types of fishing gears can damage or even destroy sensitive marine habitats. Gear specifications and area restrictions on the use of certain gears may be necessary to reduce this risk.

Methods of achieving each of these objectives are briefly examined in the communication.

The paper states that a fresh impetus needs to be given to the promotion of more environmentally-friendly

fishing within the CFP. This calls for action under the following headings:

-a more decentralised approach to the development of more environmentally friendly fishing methods;

-greater involvement of the fishing sector in the regulatory process;

-sharing and developing knowledge at Community level;

-simplification of Community rules;

-changing fishermen's behaviour through the development of incentives;

-Further development of impact assessments on the ecological, economic and social effects of environmentally friendly fishing methods, particularly as regards their long-term effects.

The Commission intends to follow up on the ideas outlined above according to the following timetable.

-Review of current technical measures, 2004-2005:

-Reduction of discards, 2004-2006:

-Research, 2005-2006:

-Proposals for new financial incentives, 2004-2005: under the revised fisheries structural fund that will operate from 2007 a high priority should be given to schemes promoting environmentally-friendly fishing, including the development and use of more selective gears and compensation for short term losses for vessels participating in trials of more environmentally-friendly fishing methods. The Commission will include the relevant proposals in the context of the proposal on the future FIFG.