

Fisheries resources: recovery of the stocks of plaice and sole in the North Sea

2006/0002(CNS) - 10/01/2006 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE: to establish a management plan for the fishing of plaice and sole in the North Sea in order to rebuild safe biological limits and to guarantee future sustainable fishing.

PROPOSED ACT: Council Regulation.

CONTENT: this proposal is being presented on the basis that currently there is no established management plan for the fishing of sole and plaice in the North Sea. This, in spite of the fact, that the fishing mortality rate of both plaice and sole is of serious concern. The proposal is broadly similar to management plans proposed for sole stocks in the Bay of Biscay and the Western Channels. The proposal has been designed according to the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy, the biodiversity Action Plan and the Implementation Plan agreed at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

The Commission is presenting this proposal having consulted interested parties and stakeholders. For scientific advice it has relied on input from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) and the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). Whilst the exact risk to existing plaice and sole stock is difficult to define, the scientific committees have advised the Commission that both plaice and sole need to be brought within biologically safe limits. Plaice and sole, for example, are mainly caught together in mixed fisheries and are therefore at risk of being harvested unsustainably. A very large proportion of the plaice caught is being discarded. As a result in 2003, the Committees advised that a recovery plan for plaice was needed. In 2004 it re-issued this advice suggesting that the stock size should be rebuilt to above 230 000 t in 2006 (a 24% increase). Similar advice was given for 2005. As far as sole is concerned the Committees issued similar statements. In the North Sea sole is at full reproductive capacity but nevertheless remains at risk of being harvested in an unsustainable manner. As a result the ICES suggested a reduction in the catch by 36% to allow sole to remain within safe biological limits in 2007.

The fishing of plaice and sole in the North Sea is of particular relevance to Belgian, Dutch, British, German and Danish fishermen even though studies indicate that many fishermen catch plaice at a loss. Thus, given that the fleets currently exploiting plaice and sole operate at a loss or with a very low profit margin, measures to restore profitability are urgently needed, quite apart from their conservation merits. In summary the main elements of the proposal are as follows:

The objective of the management plan is to ensure continued exploitation of North Sea plaice and sole compatible with sustainable economic, environmental and social conditions. These objectives are to be realised by maintaining the fishing mortality rate on plaice in the North Sea at a rate equal to or no lower than 0.3 and for sole at a rate equal to or no lower than 0.2. On an annual basis the Council will establish the Total Allowable Catches (TAC's) for the following year based on a proposal from the European Commission.

In addition to setting TAC's, the management plan will be complemented by a system of fishing effort limitation, which is based on geographical areas and groupings of fishing gear. The Council will decide, on an annual basis, the maximum number of days at sea available for Community fishing vessels deploying beam trawl gear of mesh size. Specific measures are also proposed on the weighing of landings, the separate storage of plaice and sole, its transport and the specific monitoring programme.