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

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The Council held a policy debate on the draft proposal establishing a management plan for fisheries exploiting stocks of plaice and sole in the North Sea, on the basis of the following questionnaire drawn up by the Presidency. These questions reflected the concerns expressed by the interested delegations, namely the fishing mortality rates proposed, the proposed rate of reduction of the fishing mortality rates, the fishing effort, and the issue of landings.

The discussions can be summarised as follows:

- **fishing mortality targets proposed** : three delegations considered the fishing mortality rates proposed for sole and plaice as too ambitious. In the proposal, the mortality rate as proposed by the Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) would be 0.2 for sole and 0.3 for plaice in the North Sea;

- **proposed progressive reduction in the fishing mortality rates and proposed boundaries for inter annual TAC fluctuations** : three delegations asked for a more gradual and progressive reduction of the fishing mortality rates, stressing that a legislative change would require a general debate in the Council and a preassessment taking into account the social and economic consequences of the proposal in the fisheries sector. The draft proposal foresees the setting of variable TAC +/-15% for plaice and sole depending on either the mortality reduction of the past year or a TAC which would reach the target of mortality rate(0.3 for plaice and 0.2 for sole);

- **proposed fleet segments other than the one deploying beam trawl gear of mesh size equal to or greater than 80 mm** : although beam trawlers were identified as the predominant fishing vessels for sole and plaice, a few delegations found it hard to target a particular type of fleet in order to reducing the fishing effort;

- **proposed margin of tolerance and other effective alternatives to the proposed measure on the weighing of landings** : an 8% margin of tolerance in estimation of quantities in kilograms live weight is permitted. Some delegations asked for a higher margin of tolerance, up to 10% of the quantities.