Implementing sustainability in EU fisheries through maximum sustainable yield

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PURPOSE: the presentation of a Communication on implementing sustainability in EU fisheries through maximum sustainable yield (MSY).

CONTENT: Maximum Sustainable Yield, or MSY, is the highest yield that may be taken from a fish stock without lowering its productive potential for future years. The Community and its Member States agreed in Johannesburg 2002 to maintain or restore stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield, with the aim of achieving these goals for depleted stocks as soon as possible and certainly no later than 2015.

The purpose of this Communication is to set a new political orientation concerning EU fisheries management and to present a new policy approach to implementing a MSY yield. The longer-term management outlook will be based on a system that obtains the best from the productive potential of living marine resources, without compromising its use for future generations. This approach is fully consistent with the Common Fisheries Policy. This trend is also being developed in the context of the gradual implementation of the ecosystem based approach to management, which constitutes a further objective of the CFP.

The best way to achieve MSY is to exploit stocks at a moderate fishing rate. If too much fishing takes place, the stock concerned will decrease resulting in lower catches. Most fish stocks in the EU are now over fished. It has been estimated that around 81% of fish stock in EU waters are over-fished. Scientists suggest that current rates of over fishing varies on average from two to five times the level that would provide the highest catch. This over fishing has led to lower catches, lower incomes for fishermen, low profitability in many fisheries and high catches of young fish – many of which are discarded by being simply thrown back into the sea.

As well as preventing vulnerable stocks from collapsing, this approach will allow the development of larger fish stocks of all species, thus reducing costs and increasing profits for the fishing industry, as the amount of effort required per tonne of fish caught decreases. The greater availability of mature fish in larger fish stocks will also reduce the level of discarding immature fish.

The Commission warns that attempting to manage a fish stock towards a target size would need large changes in the industry's activity in order to counterbalance environmental changes in the short term. During the rebuilding phase employment may decrease. Member States will have to decide how to manage this transition. They will also have to choose between developing smaller but more efficient and profitable industries on the one hand or keeping higher levels of fisheries employment on the other. The Union's role is to provide the management framework for phasing out over fishing. Under either approach, change can be managed more easily if it occurs gradually.

The long-term plans proposed by the Commission are as follows:

- Further consultation with fishermen, consumers and other stakeholders.
- Seeking impartial scientific advice.
- Taking account of the economic, social and environmental impact of any proposed plans.

- Defining target rates for fishing and setting the means to reach such a target on a gradual basis. In other words not seek to manage biomass levels.

- Diminishing any harmful impacts of fishing on the ecosystem.

- Including technical measures to ensure that fishing of all stocks is compatible with their respective targets.

- Allowing some stock to be exploited more lightly than at MSY level in order to achieve some gain in productivity in other species.

- Establishing targets irrespective of the biological condition of the stock when the plans enter into force. In the event that a resource is more depleted than others more stringent conservation measures may be required.

- Specifying appropriate guidelines in cases where scientific advice is unable to quantify the action needed to reach MSY.

- The periodic review of the plans and their targets.

To conclude, the Commission is committed to carrying out impact assessments for all of the MSY long-term plans. Economic, social and environmental impacts of the various options available will be analysed, thus enabling the Commission and Member States to clearly identify the necessary trade-offs between short-term losses and long-term gains. The Commission invites the Regional Advisory Council and the Member States to join it in developing a more sustainable approach to the management of European fisheries, which can put an end to over fishing and help restore the European fishing industry and which helps put EU fishing back on a path of long term viability.