

Management of deep-sea fish stocks

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PURPOSE: review on the management of deep-sea fish stocks.

CONTENT: the Commission has carried out a review on the deep-sea fisheries carried out in Community waters and in the regulatory areas of the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) and the Committee for the Eastern Central Atlantic Fisheries (CECAF). Deep-water species are generally considered to be those that live at depths of greater than 400 metres.

The Commission carries out an overview of Community regulations concerning deep-sea fisheries. The main body of scientific advice for deep-sea stocks is issued every two years, but there is sometimes specific advice for certain stocks, or decisions taken in the context of the regional fisheries organisations, that require specific measures to be taken within a relatively short deadline. An example is the recommendation adopted by NEAFC that fishing effort on deep sea stocks should be reduced by 30% in 2005 and 2006. The Commission included requirements to reduce fishing effort in kW days by 30% with respect to 2003 levels in its proposals for the Council Regulation (EC) No 27/2005 and Council Regulation (EC) No 51/2006 fixing fishing opportunities for 2005 and 2006 respectively in order to comply with the NEAFC recommendation. However the Council of ministers accepted only two successive reductions of 10% in effort in 2005 and 2006.

The Commission goes on to assess the effectiveness of the Regulations. It states that the TACs set for 2003 and 2004 were in most cases too high for the stocks to sustain. Moreover, the declared catches of most stocks were considerably lower than the TACs, suggesting that the TACs were not restricting the fisheries. In proposing TAC levels for deep sea stocks for 2005 and 2006 the Commission therefore attempted to make sure that they were genuinely restrictive by using the real level of catches, not the existing TACs, as the baseline. The Council of ministers was unable to accept the Commission's methodology, adopting instead more modest reductions of a maximum of 15% with respect to the existing TACs rather than the declared catches. Furthermore, the Commission points out that, for TACs to be effective in mixed fisheries, the TACs for the individual stocks should be fixed relatively to one another at levels that minimise discards and by-catches. This is extremely difficult to achieve, even in shallow-water mixed fisheries where there is much more information available on catch and discard rates. Another problem of trying to manage deep-sea stocks using TACs is that relatively little is known about the geographical stock structure of deep-sea species. The Commission feels that, despite the difficulties and shortcomings, the TACs have probably had some effect in curbing fishing mortality on some of the main targeted species. However, it is clear that the long-term management of deep-sea stocks must complement the TACs with other measures, in particular the restriction of fishing effort.

With some exceptions, the fisheries on deepwater species have developed and expanded before sufficient information was available on which to base management advice. This has been particularly true during the last decade, where exploitation has increased on a number of species as fishing extended into deeper waters or new areas. Landings and fishing effort data are poor, and discards largely unreported even though they may be significant. This has made it difficult for the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) to suggest a level of exploitation that might be sustainable, but it does note that most exploited deepwater species were considered to be harvested outside safe biological limits, and that there should be immediate reductions in fishing effort. New fisheries should be permitted only when they expanded very slowly, and are accompanied by programmes to collect data that would allow evaluation of the stock status.

Most deep-water fisheries take a mixture of species. For example, about 70 deep-sea species have been recorded in the catches of trawlers targeting roundnose grenadier. Very little is known about the ecosystem effects of deep-sea fisheries, other than the direct damage that can be caused to the habitat by the fishing gears used. ICES has called for all the relevant information to be made available to the working group and the development of direct monitoring programmes, for example using research vessels.

The main conclusion of the review were as follows:

- many deep-sea stocks have such low productivity that sustainable levels of exploitation are probably too low to support an economically viable fishery. It must therefore be recognised that current levels of exploitation on those stocks must inevitably be reduced, either by choice in order to conserve the stocks or else because the stocks become fished to depletion. Moreover, stock recovery times are so long that the reductions in exploitation must be regarded as permanent, not as a means to rebuild stocks to allow higher exploitation rates in the longer term;
- in any case, the measures currently in force have been too poorly implemented to protect deep-sea stocks;
- current effort controls apply to all fisheries combined, yet some are likely to be more sustainable than others. The most pressing need is for better information on the distinct fisheries that are catching deep-sea species so that the fishing effort levels can be adjusted in each of them individually according to the target species and by-catch species. Licences to take part in each of the fisheries should be dependent on the vessel having a suitable track record;
- the sampling schemes to collect scientific information should be decided after consultation both at Community level and with other NEAFC contracting parties. One of the major criticisms that could be levelled at the existing legislation is that despite the obligation to collect and report data there was little or no guidance on how to do it. The sampling schemes therefore differed in content and quality between Member States. Moreover, since there was no agreed reporting format the data that were collected were difficult to aggregate. Reporting formats should therefore be clearly specified and the data made more easily available to scientific working groups;
- monitoring and control procedures must be made more rigorous, including clear procedures for reporting VMS data;
- there should be a greater emphasis on collecting relevant data to assess the ecosystem impact of deep-sea fisheries, both from commercial fishing vessels and from co-ordinated research vessel surveys.