

The impact of the EU Common Fisheries Policy on UK fisheries

Briefing note

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This briefing looks at the EU's Common Fisheries Policy and whether it has been good or bad news for the UK's fishing industry.

What the EU Common Fisheries Policy does

- Sets limits ('quota') on how much of individual species member states can fish
- Shares the quota between member states
- Structures negotiations over quota with neighbouring non-member states (ie Norway)

Why we need limits on how much we can fish

Fish populations in European waters have been heavily overfished for the better part of a century. It is a 'tragedy of the commons': if everyone can fish as much as they want, that eventually means no fish for anyone. That is why **quotas are essential**: limits on the catch of species set in line with scientific advice.

For crowded EU waters, binding international agreement is essential. Fish do not respect lines on maps: they move between 'our' waters and those of other countries, and stocks may be shared with other countries and so need to be managed together.

Sustainable fishing brings huge economic and social benefits. Our research shows that rebuilding most commercial EU fish stocks in North Atlantic waters to their 'maximum sustainable yield' would each year deliver over 2 million tonnes of additional fish, €1.6 billion additional gross revenue, and up to 64,000 new jobs¹.

The EU's quotas are beginning to reverse catastrophic fish stock decline

Quota management for the majority of commercial fish stocks began with the first CFP in 1983, a time of high fishing pressure and low stocks². Fishing pressure has gradually decreased for those species and some stocks, like North Sea cod, are now growing. This isn't the case for stocks outside of quota management, like sea bass in the Northeastern Atlantic³, which are still in huge danger.

It's taken too long to get to this point, to the detriment of smaller fishing communities and the health of our seas. Some parts of the fishing industry have consistently resisted quotas. Proposals to reduce the permitted catch of North Sea cod were resisted as "diabolical" by the National Federation of Fisherman's Organisations⁴. But these proposals were critical to help the cod stock recover – which it now has⁵.

Flawed agreements are better than no agreements

The EU Council of Ministers – fisheries ministers from EU member states – negotiate every year in private on the level of quota. Scientific advice is given but quotas are often set above advice – by an average of 20% for the last 15 years. The UK is second only to Denmark in walking away from these negotiations with the most quota set above advice⁶.

But even this is better than a free-for-all, which is exactly what happens when negotiations break down with non-EU countries like Iceland. With only good will keeping countries at the

negotiating table, quotas set for fish stocks shared with non-EU countries are set higher than scientific advice by even more (24% over the last 15 years) than those within the EU.

The discard ban will make a difference

The practice of ‘discarding’ – throwing dead fish back to the sea that are undersized, unwanted or over quota – was rightly widely criticised. Thanks largely to the ‘Fish Fight’ campaign in the UK, the EU is now phasing in a discard ban. This will help aid fish stock recovery across the entirety of EU waters, including of course the UK.

How quota is shared between countries isn’t rigged

The main mechanism that determines how the quota set for a species is allocated between member states is the ‘historic catch share’ - the proportion of how much of that species was caught, and where, by different member states between 1973-78. This “relative stability” mechanism has operated since the CFP started in 1983.

Countries that fished in each others waters before the CFP are therefore still allowed to do so. This of course works both ways – UK boats still operate regularly in other countries’ waters. The UK fleet as a whole has the same proportional access to quota species like cod – in both UK and other members states’ waters – as it has had for the last 40+ years.

It is the UK that decides whether small or large boats get to use its quota

Many ports only have a small fraction of the vessels they once had, but this is not really the EU’s fault. Because of technology boats have got bigger in developed countries in general, whether in the EU or not. But perhaps the most significant issue for small ports is how quota is allocated between different fishing fleets – this is a national decision.

All major parties in the 2015 UK election promised to ensure that more quota was allocated to low-impact and small-scale fishers. **Only 2% currently is.** The CFP does in fact stipulate that quota should be allocated transparently and objectively to social and environmental criteria. The fact that it is the UK government, not Brussels, that decides how to allocate quota has been forgotten in the debate over EU membership.

Endnotes

¹ New Economics Foundation (2015), ‘Managing EU Fisheries in the Public Interest’: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/managing-eu-fisheries-in-the-public-interest>

² International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (2015), ‘State of fish stocks in the Northeast Atlantic, the North Sea and Baltic Sea’: http://www.slideshare.net/ICES_ASC/state-of-fish-stocks-in-the-northeast-atlantic-the-north-sea-and-the-baltic-sea-50507457

³ New Economics Foundation (2015), ‘Our big chance to save sea bass: will the EU take it?’: <http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/entry/our-big-chance-to-save-sea-bass-will-the-eu-take-it>

⁴ BBC News (2001), ‘Fisherman condemn quota cuts’: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1386333.stm>

⁵ Guardian (2015), ‘North sea cod stocks bounce back, analysis shows’: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/08/north-sea-cod-stocks-bounce-back-analysis-shows>

⁶ New Economics Foundation (2015), ‘Landing the blame: overfishing in EU waters 2001-2015’: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/landing-the-blame>