EU-Mauritania fisheries partnership agreement

Fisheries agreements with non-EU countries are intended to allow EU vessels to fish for surplus stocks in a third country’s exclusive economic zone in return for a financial contribution. They are negotiated by the European Commission based on a Council mandate, and ratified by the Council with the consent of the European Parliament (EP). The 2002 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) led to a change from traditional fisheries agreements, mostly based on the principle of ‘pay, fish and go’, to a more sustainable approach under the current generation of Fisheries Partnership Agreements (FPAs).

Background

The EU and Mauritania have concluded several fisheries agreements, starting in 1987. The most recent expired in July 2012. To prevent interruption of fishing, the Commission negotiated a new two-year Fisheries Partnership Protocol under the EU-Mauritania FPA. The Council authorised its signature and provisional application in December 2012, pending EP consent for its ratification; this consent is now the subject of a plenary vote.

The EU-Mauritania FPA is the EU’s most important fisheries agreement both in terms of volume and product diversity, and in terms of financial contribution (nearly half the EU’s budget for FPAs with third countries). It enables over 100 European vessels from 11 Member States to fish in Mauritanian waters.

New fisheries protocol 2012-14

The protocol would grant the EU fleet priority access to available surplus stocks. Moreover, foreign fleets authorised by Mauritania to fish remaining surplus stocks could only gain access on the same conditions as the EU fleet. The cost for the EU budget on an annual basis remains the same: €70 million, of which €67 million would be dedicated to access rights, and €3 million to sectoral support (for sustainable fisheries development). In line with the new CFP, the protocol increases ship-owners’ fees for most access licences. The Commission estimates that they will rise from €15 to €41 million.

Fishing opportunities (i.e. catch volume/number of licences) have been reduced in absolute value for most categories, and cephalopods (octopus and squid) have been excluded from the protocol. The protocol also includes a requirement to fish over 20 nautical miles off Mauritania’s coastline, rather than 13 miles as in the previous agreement. The parties may adopt, in the Joint Committee (set up by the agreement) measures entailing a review of fishing opportunities, in which case, the financial contribution would be adjusted proportionately. The protocol provides for termination in case of under-use. A human rights clause has been included, as well as a special contribution in kind by the EU fleet to meet the nutritional needs of the local population. The new protocol also provides for increased job opportunities for Mauritanian seamen (their percentage in EU crews should rise from 37% to 60%).

While welcomed by Mauritanian fishermen for reducing pressure on fish stocks, the new provisions were strongly criticised by the EU fishing industry.

Recent developments

A joint EU-Mauritania committee meeting held on 17-18 September 2013 agreed on a number of measures, designed to improve the sustainability of the fishing opportunities, including a modification of shrimp fishing areas, a revision of the by-catch for cephalopods, lower fees for vessels of European artisan-fishermen, changes to the fishing zone for pelagic freezer trawlers and improved conditions for Mauritanian seamen on European ships.

EP Fisheries Committee views

In May 2013, taking the view that the agreement is neither economically advantageous for the EU nor beneficial to Mauritania, the Fisheries Committee declined to consent to conclusion of the protocol, taking up the recommendation of the rapporteur (Gabriel Mato Adrover, EPP, Spain). The report stressed that the protocol would increase costs for the EU and for ship-owners, while decreasing the fishing areas accessible to each fleet, ultimately leading to a substantial reduction in catches.