



Regulating North-East Atlantic deep-sea fisheries

The biological characteristics of deep-sea species and the specific features of deep marine ecosystems make them particularly sensitive to human activities. In July 2012, the Commission tabled a proposal to review rules for deep-sea fishing in the North-East Atlantic. The Council has not yet taken a position, but the European Parliament is set to vote its first reading.

Deep-sea fisheries

Technological progress in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to new forms of [fishing](#) at previously unexplored depths, from several hundred to several thousand metres below the ocean's surface. But [deep-sea ecosystems](#) still remain largely unknown today. Some deep-sea fish species can live for a very long time (over a century in the case of the orange roughy), and some [deep-sea corals](#) can be thousands of years old. Very slow growing and late reproducing fish make such a stock highly sensitive to overfishing. Vulnerable marine habitats (of corals or sponges, for example) are also particularly sensitive to some fishing methods. In view of the threats facing deep-sea stocks, and recognising the fragility of deep-sea ecosystems, initiatives have progressively been developed, both globally (e.g. United Nations [General Assembly](#), UN [Food and Agriculture Organisation](#)) and at regional level (e.g. [North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission](#) (NEAFC) to promote more responsible exploitation of deep-seas.

EU measures

EU deep-sea fisheries in the North-East Atlantic are mainly managed based on a list of identified [species](#). The Deep-sea Stocks [Regulation \(2347/2002\)](#) sets access restrictions (e.g. permits), limits on capacity, effort monitoring, specific controls (e.g. designated landing ports) and data collection (by an onboard scientific observer). There are also [catch limits](#), which are [regularly reviewed](#) and include some landing prohibitions ([e.g. for deep-sea sharks](#)). Specific fisheries area closures (e.g. under the [Technical Measures Regulation](#)) also apply to protect vulnerable

habitats, in international NEAFC waters or in EU [Natura 2000](#) sites designated for deep-water corals under the [Habitats Directive](#).

Commission proposal

The Commission has [proposed](#) a new set of measures to [replace the Deep-sea Stocks Regulation](#). It aims at exploitation of deep-sea species consistent with a precautionary approach, with some simplification (i.e. avoiding where possible two parallel systems of capacity/effort restrictions and catch limits). Since it considers bottom trawls and bottom-set gillnets as the most harmful fishing gear to vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems, the Commission proposes a complete phase-out of their use in deep seas within two years. The Commission [considers](#) the economic impact of its proposal as limited, though accepts the issue may be more sensitive at a local level in some regions (notably in France, Portugal and Spain). It also [points out](#) that EU funding may be available to help convert fisheries to gear with less impact on sea habitats.

Stakeholders

A number of NGOs, grouped under the [Deep-Sea Conservation Coalition](#), call for strong action and advocate in particular a complete phase-out of bottom trawling. Fishing sector representatives, however, have expressed strong concerns, as illustrated for example in a [joint position of the European Social Partners](#). They see a full ban on the use of deep-sea trawls and gillnets as "a disproportionate and poorly conceived approach".

European Parliament

After two [hearings](#) on deep-sea stocks in [February 2013](#) and [June 2013](#), the EP Fisheries Committee (rapporteur Kriton Arsenis, S&D, Greece) voted on the proposal on 4 November 2013. It did not support a complete ban of deep-sea bottom trawling in the North-East Atlantic, but [favoured](#) restrictions on deep-sea fisheries in areas with vulnerable ecosystems. The European Parliament is now poised to vote on the proposed Regulation ([first reading](#)).