

Deep-sea fisheries in the north-east Atlantic

Deep-sea species and marine ecosystems are particularly sensitive to human activities. The European Parliament is now to finalise the adoption of a regulation aimed at sustainable deep-sea fishing activities, while freezing their zonal footprint and protecting vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems. This regulation is the outcome of lengthy negotiations between the EP and the Council, after both institutions rejected a 2012 Commission proposal to put a definitive end to the use of bottom trawls and bottom set nets in deep-sea fisheries in the north-east Atlantic.

Fishing in deep seas

Technological progress has allowed the development in the 1980s and 1990s of new forms of [fishing](#) at previously unexplored depths, from several hundred to several thousand metres below the ocean's surface. However, numerous deep-sea fish species grow slowly, are long-living and reproduce late, which makes the stocks highly sensitive to overfishing. The features of some [deep-sea ecosystems](#) (with cold-water corals or sponges, for example) also make them particularly vulnerable to fishing.

EU deep-sea fisheries in the north-east Atlantic, mainly defined on the basis of target species, have been managed since the early 2000s. They are subject to [regular fixing of fishing possibilities](#) (through the establishment of total allowable catches). Under the Deep-sea Stocks Regulation (No [2347/2002](#)), fishing for these species is subject to a permit system, limits on capacity, and specific monitoring and control measures (e.g. designated landing ports and on-board observers). Moreover, deep-sea fisheries are subject to specific [technical measures](#), notably closed areas to protect vulnerable habitats in line notably with decisions by the regional fisheries management organisation concerned, the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission ([NEAFC](#)). The need for more responsible exploitation of deep seas is also promoted at global level (through, for instance, United Nations General Assembly [resolutions](#), Food and Agriculture Organization [projects](#) and [guidelines](#)).

A long-lasting debate close to conclusion

In 2012, the [Commission](#) tabled a [proposal](#) to replace the 2002 Deep-sea Stocks Regulation with a new set of more restrictive measures, among which was included a complete phasing out, within two years, of the use of bottom trawls and bottom-set gillnets when fishing for deep-sea species. Supported by a [coalition of NGOs](#), this latter draft measure was strongly opposed by the [fishing sector](#) concerned, primarily vessels in Portugal, France, and Spain. The European Parliament adopted its first reading position in December 2013 and it took a further two years before trilogue discussions started on this controversial proposal. With both rejecting the idea of a straightforward ban of bottom trawls and set nets in deep-sea fisheries, the EP and Council finally agreed on a [compromise](#) on 30 June 2016. Vessels using such bottom trawls and nets should be subject to a 20 % on-board observer coverage (including outside EU waters in the NEAFC area) and any bottom trawling would be banned at depths below 800 metres. In addition to specific authorisation and control measures, deep-sea fisheries would be limited to the area where such fishing already took place in 2009-2011. The same reference period would be used for the capping of the total capacity of vessels fishing for deep-sea species. Additional requirements would apply to protect newly discovered zones with vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems. On 18 October, the Council adopted its first-reading position (with Spain voting against), confirming the compromise text. This trilogue agreement, which substantially amended the initial proposal, was subsequently formally supported by the Commission on 21 October 2016 and later endorsed by the Committee on Fisheries on 5 December 2016.

The European Parliament is now due to vote in plenary in December, with a view to second-reading adoption, on this new regulation on deep-sea stock fisheries ([2012/0179\(COD\)](#); rapporteur Isabelle Thomas, S&D, France).

