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Cod recovery

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COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Brussels, 2.04.2008
SEC(2008)389

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Accompanying document to the
Proposal for a

COUNCIL REGULATION

**amending Regulation (EC) No 423/2004 as regards the recovery of cod stocks and
amending Regulation (EEC) No 2847/93**

SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

on the proposal establishing revised measures for the recovery of cod stocks

{COM(2008)162}

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The Impact Assessment concerns a proposal that would establish a revised approach to the recovery of cod stocks. The scope of the proposal covers the cod fishery in the four areas covered by the current cod recovery regulation – namely in (1) the North Sea, Skagerrak and Eastern Channel; (2) the Kattegat; (3) the west of Scotland; (4) the Irish Sea, and also a new area - (5) the Celtic Sea.

Following a continuous decline in spawning stock biomass of the cod stocks over the years, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advised that the stocks were in danger of collapse, and recommended that a recovery regime be put in place. As a result, the Cod Recovery Plan was adopted in 2004 as a commitment by the Council of Ministers to set total allowable catches (TACs) and effort limits according to predefined rules in response to the latest scientific advice.

Unfortunately, after four years of application, the regime has not delivered the reduction of fishing mortality necessary for the recovery of the cod stocks. The slow progress towards the stock rebuilding makes it necessary to revise the terms and conditions of the plan in order to address its weaknesses.

This report assesses the options available to the Community to provide effective measures for recovery of cod stocks. It analyses the following options:

Option 1: The 'status quo' option – leaving the current plan unchanged.

The current cod recovery plan is based on the requirement that the TAC be fixed each year at a level that would result in a 30% increase in spawning biomass until safe biological limits to avoid stock depletion are achieved. This approach has proven unworkable.

Option 2: Improving enforcement

Retaining the current legislative proposal but improving enforcement has been considered. However, recent analyses indicate that reported landings are within permitted levels and deployed effort is well within permitted levels. Enforcement is believed to have improved recently and is not the major component of the overfishing problem. Improving enforcement, although very desirable, would not of itself be sufficient to ensure cod recovery.

Option 3: Closing the fishery

Complete closures of the cod fisheries to rebuild the stocks have been considered as one of the possible management options. Such drastic measures would have very substantial social and economic consequences because other commercially important species (such as haddock, whiting, anglerfish and Nephrops) are caught in the same fisheries. Despite exhaustive analysis, no practical candidates for closed areas to protect cod have been identified. The difficulty is that cod are very widespread, and the closure of any specific zone is (if implemented without effort reductions) likely to move fishing effort into a different area where it is likely that more cod will be caught.

Option 4: Using economic instruments

Economic instruments have been considered for recovering cod. They can increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of environmental management, create incentives for investment and generate financial resources for preserving biodiversity. However, the use of policy-specific economic incentives as primarily conservation instruments is not foreseen under the Common Fisheries Policy.

Option 5: Simplifying and strengthening the Cod Recovery Plan

This option covers revising the current cod recovery measures in order to provide simpler and clearer rules for setting TACs and make them more robust to weak or absent scientific advice. The revised plan would replace the existing days-at-sea system with a method for devolving the administration of fishing effort to Member States, within levels to be defined in Community legislation. It would focus the effort reductions on vessels catching the most cod.

Following scientific advice as well as the outcome of stakeholder consultations, the objective of increasing the size of the cod stocks by a fixed percentage each year can be replaced with a method for moving gradually towards a lower fishing mortality that will deliver stock recovery and eventually high yields.

Conclusion

The report concludes that option 5 – the improved plan proposing changes to the cod recovery measures along several lines - should be chosen as the other options would be either ineffective, impractical, or have a severe adverse effect on employment and incomes in the short term.

This policy option was also supported by stakeholders, who have been extensively consulted during the development of this policy.