



A truly disappointing agreement

The decision of the European Council, to reduce the TAC for cod in the North Sea by 50% is not the end of the fishery but may well be the end of the fishery as we know it. Further to being a disaster for many small industries in remote areas, it will deprive society of one of the most sustainable sources of protein.

It is a slap in the face of the fishermen, who pay the price for other people's lack of concern or willingness to listen to those affected by the decisions.

In an attempt to react responsibly to the scientific advice on North Sea cod from ICES when it was published in June, the European fisheries organisations with a direct interest in the stock decided to work together in an attempt to propose a way to improve the situation. This entailed a significant amount of work spread across a number of meetings. Despite having many common interests, the fishing fleets have different structures and traditions, and regulations vary between Norway and EU. Even within the EU, there are differences in the way that common regulations are implemented and huge differences in fishing patterns.

Nevertheless, the industry managed to agree on measures that would bring the cod stock closer to the politically agreed target of MSY, would increase the stock size and reduce the fishing pressure to the lowest level ever experienced. It would also enable the fishermen to fully exploit other key commercial stocks that thrive in the North Sea¹ and perhaps enable more fishermen to survive.

¹ Contrary to what many green NGOs try to seduce the broader public to believe, many of the stocks in the North Sea are actually increasing and the biomass of the most commercially interesting stocks (whiting, haddock, saithe, cod, plaice and sole) have increased from 1,3 million tonnes in 1978 to 1,8 million tonnes in 2019. Catches of *Nephrops* or Norwegian lobster increased during the decline of the cod stock in the '90s and have remained high since the mid 2000s

Every country contributed with proposals that would mean a reduction in their own activities. It was seen as a price that had to be paid in order to contribute to the recovery of the cod stock. Alas – the European Commission and Member States decided to take a simplistic view of a complex situation, they took what was offered and gave nothing back.

With the combination of an extremely low TAC, a discard ban, and stock that is approximately twice the size of its all time low², the result of the Council meeting is the “Chronicle of a death foretold”.

It is not possible for the fishing fleets to catch the quotas of abundant other stocks and the green lobby have effectively succeeded in depriving society of thousands of tonnes of protein harvested with very low carbon footprint.

Is it really so important to meet the target in a single year, rather than being approached in progressive steps over a few more years, that the European fishing industries must be strangled in the process? Who has an interest in this? Who pays for it? Why?

North Sea fisheries have a long history and tradition and play an important role for many coastal communities. Overfishing has indeed taken place in some periods and areas, but this is no longer the case for the vast majority of activities – and certainly not for the fishery in the North Sea, which is amongst the most heavily regulated fisheries in the world. The fishing industry is deeply engaged in ensuring that the fishing activities are performed in a sustainable way. Fishermen more than anybody have an interest in stable stocks producing high yields and have millions of Euros invested in it. They also have the best knowledge of the operations at sea. Why are they then totally ignored when it comes to ways to improve the situation?

“Disappointing” is a diplomatic word in this context.

Shetland Fishermen’s Association (UK), The National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations (UK), Danish Fishermen Producer Organisation (DK), Scottish fishermen’s Federation (UK), VisNed (NL), Scottish White Fish Producer’s Association Limited (UK), Nederlandse Vissersbond (NL), FROM NORD, Organisation de Producteurs á la pêche (FR), Norges Fiskarlag (N), Scottish Fishermen’s Organisation (UK), Erzeugergemeinschaft der Nord- und Ostseefischer GmbH (D), Rederscentrale (B)

² Despite total catches being more than 30.000 tonnes in 2006 when the adult stock was half the size it is estimated to be now, the stock steadily increased over the next 10 years.