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The European Union Renews Agreement to Buy West African Fish

The European Union has negotiated a renewal of a Fishery Agreement with the West African country of Mauritania. The agreement renews the Fisheries Protocol for a further five years. The Protocol allows fishing vessels from EU countries to fish in Mauritanian waters for cephalopods (squid, octopus), crustaceans, (lobsters, crabs, prawns etc) black hake, tuna and other fish. The number of vessels fishing in each category are regulated to ensure that the fishery will be sustainable.

A number of measures have been adopted in the new Protocol to benefit Mauritania and her own fishermen. The zones in which EU vessels operate have been pushed further from the Mauritanian coast to afford greater protection to the local small-scale vessels. The EU has also said it will land an increased volume of its fish catches in the country to boost onshore jobs and to allow the Mauritians to monitor catches better. The EU vessels will also employ a greater number of Mauritanian fishermen under the new Protocol.

Faced with a severe decline in the fishing stocks in its own waters - largely as a result of past over-fishing and destruction of breeding habitats - the European Union has increasingly sought to conclude agreements with other countries that will provide new grounds for EU vessels to fish in. In the short-term this benefits those countries - the EU is paying heavily for this particular agreement with Mauritania - EUR 430 million, a 61 per cent increase on what it paid last time. However, the EU does not have exclusive access to these waters and with pressure on world fish stocks everywhere and the difficulties in satisfactory monitoring, it is likely that these stocks will become exhausted in their turn. Concerns have been voiced that countries like Mauritania are, in effect, selling their future food supplies, though this is denied by the European Commission.

"I welcome this agreement." said Franz Fischler, the European Commissioner responsible for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries. "It is beneficial both to Mauritania and to the EU. It provides some increased fishing opportunities for EU vessels and an enhanced financial contribution for Mauritania. This will benefit the development of the local fisheries sector. This deal is in line with our guiding principle of achieving sustainable fisheries in third country waters. We have agreed on new provisions which will ensure the protection of fish resources in Mauritania, including a regular review of the situation on the basis of the state of the fish resources," the Commissioner said.

Part of the EU's financial contribution will go to support a number of targeted measures aimed at improving fisheries in Mauritania. These include support for scientific and technical research into the state of the fish resources, particularly cephalopods and pelagic species, in the Mauritanian fisheries zone.