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Catch all

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The European Union is demanding an increase of up to 60 per cent in the amount of fish its trawlers are allowed to catch off West Africa.

Conservation scientists are appalled by the proposals. They say these waters are already seriously overfished, and that such large catches will be unsustainable.

The demand comes as the EU is proposing to drastically cut its fishing fleet to save dwindling fish stocks in the North Sea.



Photo: Corbis

Nutrient-rich cold water rises to the surface along 2000 kilometres of the Atlantic coast from Morocco to Guinea-Bissau, making this one of the world's last great fisheries. But since the arrival of foreign trawlers in the past decade, particularly from the EU, fish stocks have crashed.

"Huge wastage"

"It is clear there is overfishing throughout the region," says Pierre Campredon, a French marine biologist who advises the Mauritanian government on fisheries. "And there is huge wastage. Shrimp trawlers often throw back more unwanted fish than they catch."

Several hundred trawlers from Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and other EU nations operate in the zone under licences negotiated between the EU and West African governments. The three largest licences, covering waters controlled by Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, are up for renewal this year.

Europe is pushing for big increases. In the first negotiations of the year, which continued in Dakar this week, EU negotiators have asked Senegal for a 61 per cent increase in licensed catch from the end of April, according to Senegalese negotiators.

Critical moment

Senegal's fish stocks are "at a critical moment" says Amadou Wade of Fenagie Peche, the country's fisheries federation. "There is pillage, both by Senegalese and foreign boats." Foreign trawlers, dominated by the EU, take 100,000 tonnes of fish from Senegalese waters each year, Wade says.

The negotiations with Senegal are likely to set a precedent for talks in the coming weeks with its neighbour Mauritania, which has the richest fishing grounds in the region.

West African governments feel under pressure to oblige the EU, says Campredon. "These countries have large debts. They say they cannot refuse the EU for that reason." Wade, one of Senegal's negotiators, says that "the EU could refuse to let us have access to its markets for trade if we don't comply".

Radical overhaul

The revelations come at an embarrassing time for the EU, which has a policy of supporting sustainable fisheries.

Last week, the European Commission announced plans to cut the EU fleet by 40 per cent and radically overhaul its fisheries policy, including its negotiations with foreign governments. Otherwise, it warned, "the status of the Community as a responsible international player will be undermined".

EU fisheries spokesman Gregor Kreuzhuber this week refused to discuss the detail of the negotiations. "The Commission hasn't formally mentioned figures," he said. "Any final agreement will be subject to an assessment of the resources."

Fred Pearce, Dakar

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