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Europe again ignores scientists' advice on fish

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Debora MacKenzie, Brussels

The 25 fisheries ministers of the European Union have rejected a plan to close areas of the North Sea to cod fishing. And for the fifth year running they have ignored scientists' pleas to stop cod fishing in the North Sea entirely, instead allowing a catch for 2005 of 27,300 tonnes, the same as 2004.

"You really have to ask if the ministers are serious about saving the cod," says Charlotte Mogensen, a marine biologist working with WWF, the Worldwide Fund for Nature, in Brussels, Belgium. Scientists fear that without drastic action, cod might disappear in the North Sea as it did in the 1990s off Newfoundland.

After the now traditional all-night session, UK fisheries minister Ben Bradshaw claimed that the deal met the requirements of both the fisheries industry and conservation. Cod quotas for the North Sea have been slashed nearly five-fold since 1999, and fishermen's associations insist the cod is now recovering.

But the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, a scientific body based in Copenhagen which advises the European Commission on fisheries management, says that while quotas have fallen, catches have not fallen much, as up to two-thirds may be unreported.

Furthermore, the number of breeding fish is well below what is needed to maintain the stock, says ICES, and the number of young cod produced in the last three years has been "well below average".

Politically impossible

In October ICES advised that the real North Sea cod catch would have to fall by more than half to conform with the EU's own cod recovery plan agreed earlier in 2004. It recommended zero catch, "until there is strong evidence of recovery".

But ministers insist this is politically impossible for hard-hit fishing industries. In an attempt to steer a path between the two, the European Commission proposed in December to maintain the cod catch at the same level, but to close most of the areas in the North Sea where fishermen have actually been finding cod.

Scientists doubted this would work. A similar effort to close sensitive areas to cod fishing in 2001 had no beneficial effect on stocks, says Adriaan Rijnsdorp of the Dutch Institute for Fisheries Research in Ijmuiden.

Yet the ministers rejected even that much protection. And instead of cutting the number of cod-fishing days vessels are allowed per month from 15 to 10, which Mogensen says would cut fishing to sustainable levels, ministers agreed to lose only one, or for some boats two days a month. Quotas for the much smaller cod fishery in the Irish Sea and west of Scotland were cut by 15 per cent, but increases in haddock quotas in the same places could partly cancel those cuts, as more cod will be caught by accident alongside the haddock.

"It is clear that the Commission cannot conceive or implement measures to protect the stocks in its charge, not to mention allowing them to rebuild," says Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, a prominent fisheries biologist. He told **New Scientist**: "The fishing industry will only suffer from this."

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