

IFM-GEOMAR



Fishery reform slips through the net

Upcoming change fails to tackle the pernicious relationship between government advisers and the fishing lobby, says **Rainer Froese**.

The fishing industry is less important to Europe's economy than its sewing-machine manufacturers. Yet it consistently gets to overrule scientific advice and drive fish stocks to the brink of collapse. Without massive subsidies, European fisheries would be bankrupt: the cost of hunting the few remaining fish would exceed the income from selling the catch.

Every year, fishery scientists are asked by politicians for advice on how hard stocks can be fished without pushing them over the edge, forcing the scientists into a position akin to that of a physician present at a waterboarding session. Adding insult to injury, much of their advice is ignored, and most stocks are outside of safe biological limits.

The sad state of European fish stocks is not a natural or societal failure that good management simply could not overcome. No, it is a desired outcome of Europe's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which has allowed the fishing lobby to infiltrate the European Union's political system.

The European public has been led to believe that fisheries management is decided by bureaucrats in Brussels. In fact, member states have the most influence; they make and implement the decisions made in Brussels and control compliance by fishermen. In most member states, this power is with the ministry of agriculture. Yet too many of these ministries have a cosy relationship with the fishing lobby — many of the civil servants firmly believe that it is their job to protect the rights of their national fishing sector, including the rights to obtain subsidies and to overfish. This concentration of explorative, legislative and executive power within a ministry belies what we learned in school about the importance of separated powers in a democratic system.

Perhaps because the public still has romantic notions about fishing, and the media are drawn to fishermen who block ports or dump fish in the streets of Brussels, the European fisheries lobby gets away with destructive tactics. It routinely discredits scientists and their advice, denies the depleted status of the stocks, fights the establishment of protected areas, defends the use of destructive equipment, insists on the right to catch juvenile fish and requests the abandonment of closed spawning seasons and areas. In doing so, it has destroyed the very basis that fishing depends on. European fishers have profit margins of about 3–6%; in New Zealand, which has successfully reformed its fisheries, the margins are closer to 40%.

Fisheries management in Europe culminates in the closed-door meetings of the Council of the European Union. Decisions in the council are typically taken by a two-thirds majority, but need consensus if the European Commission feels that its proposal has been ignored.

That was recently the case in a preparatory meeting on the threatened bluefin tuna. The member states were unhappy with the commission's proposal, which followed the scientific advice, and asked commission officials to leave the room. They then agreed unanimously, with few abstentions, on much higher catches.

Although the ministers change every few years, their advisers remain and oppose any true change. As a result, the CFP has more than 600 regulations, many of which contradict each other. For example, regulated mesh sizes catch smaller fish than the fishers are allowed to land. These fish are then dumped dead at sea. The setting of next year's catches has been described as political horse trading, with unholy alliances supporting each other in an effort to secure the highest possible share for the national fishing sector. Thus, Germany and Poland will support higher French catches in the Atlantic, and France will support higher catches in the Baltic.

This is the situation that Maria Damanaki faced when she took charge of European fisheries last year. Building on the excellent 2009 green paper on the reform of the CFP, which documents much of what I have described above, Damanaki confronted the council with clear demands for rebuilding European fish stocks until 2015, in accordance with international agreements. The commission's proposal for the reform will be officially published on 13 July.

Considering the mess that we are in, the reform proposes big steps in the right direction. Internationally agreed reference points for sustainable fishing will finally be recognized and the discarding of perfectly good fish for bureaucratic reasons will be phased out. But the proposal falls short of reforms enacted in New Zealand, Australia and

the United States. These countries have precautionary fishing targets and close fisheries when stocks enter the slope to collapse. Europe will have no such precautionary margins and will only gradually reduce fishing pressure when stocks are on the slope to collapse, with no default rule for closing a fishery. Whereas the other countries have phased out or drastically reduced subsidies, the commission proposes only to reshuffle them.

There is no sign that the proposal will tackle the concentration of power with agriculture ministers or the excessive influence of the fishing lobby — for example, by transferring the management of wild fish to environment ministries. The commission's restraint here is understandable: it knows that its plans to save Europe's seas must be approved by the same advisers and lobbyists who have wrecked them. ■

Rainer Froese is a marine ecologist at the Leibniz Institute for Marine Sciences at the Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel, Germany. e-mail: rfroese@ifm-geomar.de

THE SAD STATE OF
EUROPEAN
FISH STOCKS
IS NOT A FAILURE
THAT GOOD
MANAGEMENT
SIMPLY COULD NOT
OVERCOME.

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Discuss this article
online at:
go.nature.com/xvclj8