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Discard – Incompatible with Sustainable Fisheries

Statement from The North Sea Commission (proposal from the NSC, Marine Resources Group)

Background

Discards are the portion of a catch of fish which is not retained on board during commercial fishing operations and is returned, often dead or dying, to the sea. The practice of discarding is driven by economic and political factors; fish which are discarded are often catches of species which fishermen are not allowed to land, for instance due to quota restrictions, or unmarketable species, e.g. individuals which are below minimum landing sizes. Discards form part of the by-catch of a fishing operation, although by-catch includes marketable species caught unintentionally.

According to a recent study, almost one million tonnes in weight and many millions of pounds worth of discards – including haddock, cod, whiting and flatfish like plaice, sole and dab - are thrown back into the North Sea after they are caught in trawlers' nets every year, and they are usually dead by the time they are returned to the water¹. This quantity equates to nearly one-third of the total weight of fish brought ashore, and one-tenth of the estimated total of biomass of fish in the North Sea.

The problem differs greatly between different maritime areas, as a result of different fishing practises but also of different species composition. Generally the discard problem is greater in so-called mixed fisheries, e.g. North Sea demersal trawling fisheries.

Policies on Discard

Discard is a well known phenomenon and drawback in most forms of fisheries management. Criticism of discard practises is widespread, in the fisheries sector as well as outside of it, among consumers, citizens groups and in political forums. The issue of discards has been addressed by The North Sea Regional Advisory Council (NSRAC) which has proposed that an effort management system be put in place in the Kattegat in order to reduce discards substantially.

In Europe, Norway and Iceland are already operating with a discard ban. Recently the EU Commission proposed the gradual introduction of a discard ban in the European Union. A proposal is expected from the EU Commission in 2008.

Statement from the NSC

The member regions of the NSC are supporting measures which will lead to the gradual elimination of discard in Europe. Discard represents serious mismanagement of marine resources. The NSC also believes that discard reflects negatively on all fisheries and undermines the standing of the industry with consumers. Therefore prioritized actions and management reforms are urgent. These should introduce technical and management measures

¹ University Of Newcastle Upon Tyne (2004, November 3). Call To End Fishing 'Discards'. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved March 13, 2008, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/10/041030144323.htm>



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which allows for the gradual elimination of discards, while at the same time allows for the industry to adjust to a more sustainable regime.

Proposal

The NSC Marine Resources Group proposes that the NSC adopts this statement as an expression of its concern for sustainable fisheries and a healthy marine environment. The NSC urges the European Union to move forward towards a system of fisheries management where discard is reduced to a minimum. We believe that measures should be planned and executed in co-operation with the fishing industry and fisheries science, integrating efforts of both communities in this crucial effort.