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Statement on the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)

The European Union's Common Fisheries Policy is widely acknowledged as being one of its least successful policies.

Currently the policy is up for review following on the heels of a previous one in 2002. The current review was launched by a Green Paper published in April 2009.

But no-one at the top in Brussels seems prepared to even contemplate undertaking the root and branch reform of EU fisheries policy that the current crisis demands.

The justification for the CFP is that only such an international regime can guarantee proper conservation of 'common' EU fish stocks. In fact the CFP has produced a conservation crisis. Its conservation record is the worst in the world.

The Green Paper acknowledges that 30% of EU stocks are outside safe biological limits and nearly 90% fished at levels beyond Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY).

The CFP consists of a highly centralised and bureaucratic system governed by some 634 detailed and complex regulations and laws devised at EU level but implemented and policed by the member states.

It has more to do with a political project than with the realities of fishing and with proper resource management.

The harsh consequences of the policy has fallen principally on member states with the largest fishing grounds

Rather than allocating the 'common' fishing resources on scientific advice, catches are divided up in a political hagggle.

Under the CFP quota system, stocks of fish for which vessels have no quota are largely thrown back dead representing a biological and economic loss of staggering proportions. The discarding of marketable fish is perhaps one of the starkest examples of the failure of the CFP.

Discarded fish are a precious resource which the regulations of the CFP prevent skippers from landing.

The policy was flawed from the outset, with the principle of "equal access" agreed in advance of an number of states with large fisheries resources joining the EEC. The principle of equal access means incoming member states with big fleets but few fishing waters had to be found fish to catch.

Some of the additional fishing has come at the expense of other member states and the rest has come from deals with developing countries. Both arrangements have caused resentment.

The CFP has failed to engage with the industry to improve fisheries policies. The disconnect between fishermen and the centralised policy decision apparatus in Brussels means that fishermen have very limited opportunity to influence EU fisheries policies.

The decision making process and the punitive regulatory approach of the CFP fails to positively harness the innovation and knowledge of fishermen in better managing fish stocks. It has long been accepted that involvement of fishermen in the design and implementation of fisheries management policies leads to more effective management measures and the use of incentives further aids acceptance and compliance.

The rigidity of the CFP has stifled innovation both at industry and member-state levels. This rigidity is a consequence of the bureaucratic and centralising regulatory system which is such a key component of the EU decision-making process.

The CFP has failed to match fishing capacity with fishing opportunities. The Green Paper notes that, in spite of capacity reduction targets and decommissioning schemes, on average, fleets have reduced capacity by only 2% a year.

As long as the CFP lasts, there is an onus on the Commission to clearly show that each member state is seeking to ensure that the impact of their fleets, in terms of catches rather than landings, is in line with available fishing opportunities. It has not discharged this onus to date. It is unjust to require further capacity cuts from those member states that have genuinely sought to manage fleets responsibly if others have failed to take adequate measures.

What is needed is a policy to reverse the centralisation of the CFP and restore decision making to member states. This will unbind blanket restrictions and lead to the development of more appropriate management measures. Yet the Commission refuses to even consider the quite legitimate option of repatriation of powers over fisheries policy decision making, fisheries management and fishing waters back to member states.

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