

To MSY and beyond: achieving healthy stocks to achieve healthy seas

SUMMARY

We call on MEPs to support the Commission's proposal:

- to restore and maintain populations of harvested species above levels which can produce the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by 2015 (Article 2(1));
- to implement the precautionary and ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management (Article 2(2) and 2(3));

Amend the proposal to ensure that:

- environmental sustainability is understood as a prerequisite for healthy and economically viable fisheries
- fishing limits do not exceed the scientifically recommended catch levels; and
- measures under the CFP contribute to the objectives of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and in particular to the achievement or maintenance of Good Environmental Status.

What is the problem?

Healthy seas and productive fish stocks are a precondition for a sustainable and profitable fishing sector. Of the assessed stocks, 63% in the Atlantic are overfished, 82% in the Mediterranean and 4 out of the 6 stocks for which scientific advice is available in the Baltic¹. This is primarily the result of decision-making that is based on short-term considerations and meant to cushion the economic and social impacts of reduced fishing opportunities. In reality, exploitation levels have been kept too high, in total disregard of the limits of the ecosystem and of scientific advice. As a consequence, the health of our seas and the long term sustainability of fish stocks are compromised by overfishing and the viability of the sector is undermined.

Until recently, the EU set unsustainably high fishing limits, depleting several fish populations to levels close to collapse. The reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) can reverse this disastrous trend of overexploiting marine resources.

What are the solutions?

Ending the overexploitation of fish stocks requires us to balance what we take out of the seas with what the ocean can replenish. To rebuild our fish stocks, we need to set fishing opportunities in accordance with the availability of the resource and the limits of the ecosystem.

¹ Communication from the commission concerning a Consultation on fishing opportunities COM(2011) 298 final



The CFP must prevent overfishing by setting legally binding catch limits not exceeding scientific advice that ensure that harvested populations remain above levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) by 2015.

Why Maximum Sustainable Yield?

Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) is – theoretically – the largest yield, or catch, that can be taken from a stock over an indefinite period, while still maintaining population size at the point of maximum growth.

To simplify (and leaving aside external factors), the status of a harvested stock depends on the size of the fish population (biomass [B]) and the rate of exploitation (fishing mortality [F]). The MSY concept is therefore used to determine catch levels below the fishing mortality (F_{MSY}) that – theoretically – ensures that the population size, i.e. the biomass (B_{MSY}), is maintained over time.

The EU is legally bound to restore fish populations to B_{MSY} under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, Articles 61.3 and 119.1(a)), the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA, Article 5 and Annex II), and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (Article 7.2.1).

In addition, the UNFSA establishes that F_{MSY} is a minimum limit reference point, which means that MSY levels should be considered as a limit, not a target. To achieve healthy fish stocks, the goal must be to maintain populations above levels that can produce the MSY.

Some EU fish stocks are already being exploited at MSY rates: in 2011, 13 out of the 35 Atlantic stocks and 11 out of the 61 Mediterranean stocks for which the MSY rate has been determined were assessed to be exploited at the MSY rate.

Why 2015?

The EU committed to “restoring stocks to levels that can produce MSY (...) for depleted stocks on an urgent basis and where possible not later than 2015” under Article 31(a) of the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The EU is therefore bound by this international deadline.

How to go beyond MSY and achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) of marine waters?

MSY is an intermediate objective to achieving healthy stocks and healthy seas. We must go beyond the single species approach of MSY and implement an approach to fisheries management which considers the interactions between fish stocks, other species and associated ecosystems in an integrated manner. In other terms, the CFP must implement a holistic ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management and contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD, Directive 2008/56), namely to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in the marine environment by 2020 at the latest.



This will require the CFP to go beyond the objective of the recovery of fish stocks and to contribute, under the MSFD, to a number of management objectives, including the recovery and maintenance of:

- biodiversity;
- fish stocks exhibiting a population age and size distribution that is indicative of a healthy stock;
- a functioning ecosystem and marine food web; and
- seafloor integrity.

What has the Commission proposed?

The Commission proposal for the Basic Regulation sets out in particular four provisions that aim to address the problem of overfishing and to rebuild fish stocks:

- The commitment under Article 2(2) to restore and maintain populations of harvested species above levels which can produce the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by 2015;
- The commitment under Article 2(2) to implement the precautionary approach to fisheries management;
- The commitment under Article 2(3) to implement the ecosystem-based approach and to consequently limit the impact of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem; and
- The commitment under Article 3 to eliminate unwanted catches.

Our recommendations in response to COM proposal:

We recommend that the Commission proposal be addressed as follows:

- Maintain the proposed objective to restore and maintain populations of harvested species above levels which can produce the MSY, not later than 2015;
- Maintain the commitment to implement the precautionary and ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management;
- Include provisions to ensure that environmental sustainability is understood as a prerequisite for healthy and economically viable fisheries;
- Include provisions to ensure that fishing limits do not exceed the scientifically recommended catch levels; and
- Ensure explicit commitment that measures under the CFP contribute to the objectives of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and in particular to the achievement or maintenance of good environmental status.

Contacts:

Tatiana Nemcova	BirdLife Europe	+32 (0)2 238 50 93	tatiana.nemcova@birdlife.org
Amelie Malafosse	Oceana	+32 (0)4 76 28 55 54	amalafosse@oceana.org
Cathrine Schirmer	OCEAN2012 Coalition	+32 (0)4 83 66 69 67	cschirmer@pewtrusts.org
Saskia Richartz	Greenpeace EU Unit	+32 (0)2 274 19 02	Saskia.Richartz@greenpeace.org
Rita Santos	WWF EPO	+32 (0)2 761 04 22	rsantos@wwf.eu

