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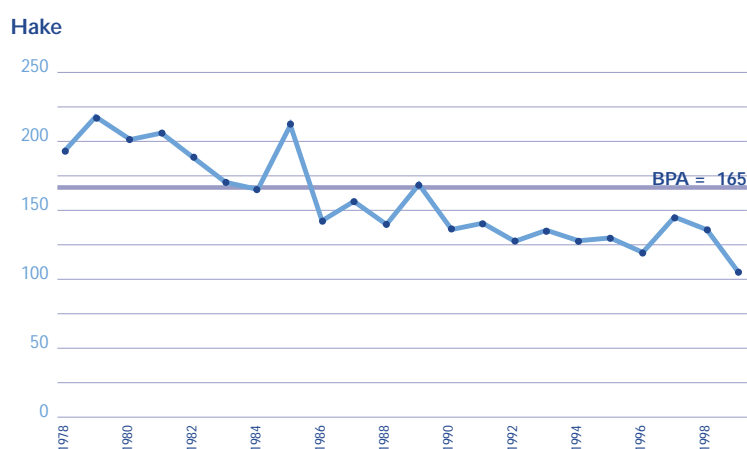
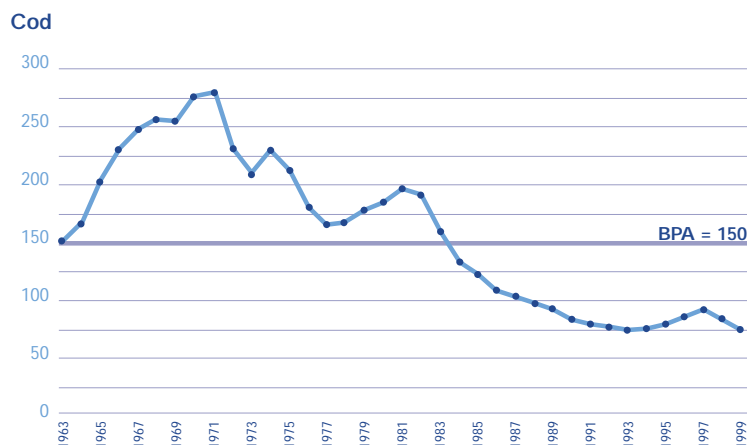
Cod and hake: the inevitable recovery measures

At the end of last year, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) warned that the stocks of cod in the North Sea and in the west of Scotland as well as the Northern hake stock - found from Skagerrak to the Bay of Biscay - were in severe danger of collapse (see graphs). In the North Sea, for example, only three out of ten cod reach maturity (4 years).

Fishermen were aware of the problem as they were increasingly unable to catch their quotas for these species. Not surprisingly, a consensus formed on the need not only for urgent action but also for sustained measures to help the recovery of the affected stocks. At its December 2000 meeting, the Council agreed with the Commission that recovery measures should be established for cod and hake.

This article looks at the reasons why these measures are required, what they entail and the range of constraints that they have to take into account.

Changes in the populations of North Sea cod and northern hake brood stock fish (thousands of tonnes)



BPA: Biomass according to the precautionary approach.

Cod and hake: two different fisheries

Cod and Northern hake are caught in various fisheries involving different fleets. Cod is caught in demersal fisheries (targeting bottom-dwelling species) using towed and static nets in the North Sea and west of the British Isles and also in fisheries that target other bottom-dwelling species such as haddock, whiting, plaice, sole, Norway lobsters, angler fish and megrim. Cod is targeted by fleets from the UK, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany and Denmark.

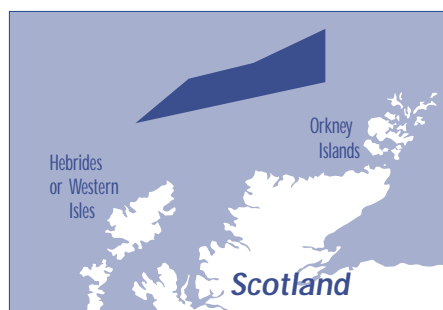
The Northern hake stock has been the principal fishery for fleets operating mainly off the Irish, French and Spanish Atlantic coasts using towed and static nets and lines. Hake is also caught incidentally by trawlers fishing for Norway lobsters or flatfish. The fleets which target hake come from France, Spain, Ireland and the UK.

The fact that both cod and hake are caught in fisheries targeting other species mean that recovery measures have to cover these other fisheries, too, while not creating a major hindrance to their continuation.

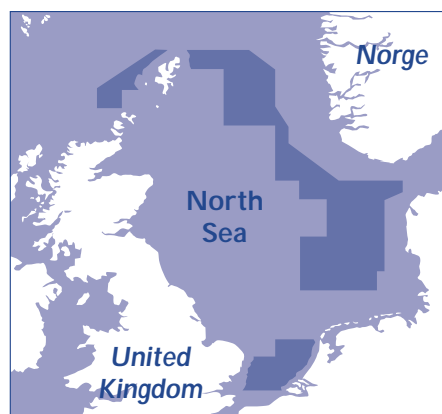
Measures already in place

The first thing that was done at the end of last year was to reduce the amount of cod and hake that fishermen are allowed to catch this year. At its December meeting, the Council of Fisheries Ministers set the lowest-ever level of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for North Sea cod - reduced by 40%, cod in the west of Scotland - cut by 50%, and Northern hake - cut by almost 50% from the previous year's levels.

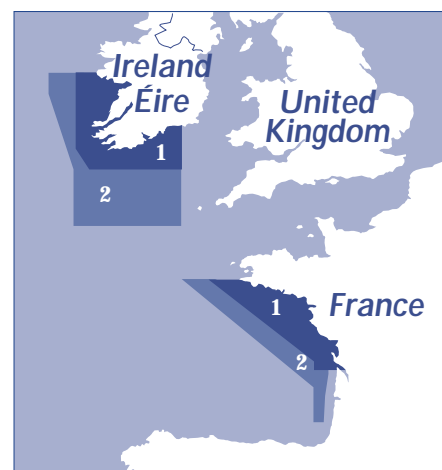
In addition to reducing the TACs for these and other stocks for 2001, the Council also



Areas where cod fishing was banned west of Scotland.



Areas of the North Sea where cod fishing was banned.



Hake protection areas to the south and southwest of Ireland and in the Bay of Biscay.

1. Presence of observers on fishing boats in these areas.
2. Protected areas

>>> agreed that multi-annual recovery plans of at least five years' duration should be put in place as soon as possible.

Emergency measures have been set up by the Commission to provide short-term protection for these stocks, pending the presentation of proposals for definitive recovery plans.

Reducing the total allowable catches can afford some protection to the stocks concerned. Temporary closures of certain fishing areas can also provide protection to stocks at strategic periods. Thus, substantial areas were closed to fisheries likely to catch cod in the North Sea and in the west of Scotland for ten weeks during the cod spawning season earlier this year to allow as many mature cod as possible to spawn

(see maps). One of the difficulties in defining the boundaries of these zones came from the dearth of accurate data on the precise location of spawning grounds. More precise data will allow for better defined zones in the future.

The emergency measures for hake combine technical, control and data collecting elements in order to protect young hake in both targeted and non-targeted fisheries. A catch limit for hake of 20% of all fish on board has been established for vessels fishing with less than 100mm mesh size, except for vessels of less than 12 metres in length on day trips.

Protected areas, or 'boxes', in which only 100mm meshes may be used for any fishery have also been set up in the Bay of Biscay

and to the south and west of Ireland in order to protect young hake. A system for monitoring vessels fishing with less than 100 mm mesh size operating outside the boxes has been established (observers on board and sampling of landings). More precise scientific data on these fisheries will allow for the fine-tuning of measures. In addition, landing of hake may only take place in designated ports.

As a second step and before the end of the year, the Commission intends to amend the Regulation on technical measures to protect immature cod and hake by increasing the mesh size of nets used to catch these species, regulating the composition of catches allowed on board and controlling various elements in the structure of nets in order to improve selectivity.

For example, from 1 January 2002, the standard minimum mesh size for demersal fisheries in the North Sea and west of Scotland areas will go up from 100 mm to 120 mm. A number of fisheries using smaller mesh sizes are permitted, subject to strict conditions concerning the amount of cod that may be taken. For some of these fisheries which inevitably take a significant proportion of cod, the derogation from the normal mesh size to 120mm is limited to the year 2002.

Derogations

The Commission has had to make some difficult choices in deciding how far to involve other fisheries in the emergency and technical measures. In all cases, it has tried to ensure that the fisheries that are responsible for extensive catches of hake or cod are covered by mesh size or closed area rules.

Fisheries which can on the basis of data be shown to be 'clean' (e.g. taking very low by-catches of 5% or less of cod) have enjoyed derogations. In addition, in the case of hake, coastal fishing vessels of less than 12 metres operating day-trips, which account for no more than 5% of hake landings, have been exempted from the 20% by-catch limit for hake. Vessels which enjoy derogations will be subject to particular scrutiny through observers and sampling of landings.



Work on board a cod fishing vessel: this could become a rare scene if we do not take action to protect cod fisheries.

The Council will have the opportunity to review these arrangements when the Commission presents its proposals for the definition of recovery plans later this year.

A strategy for long-term recovery measures

In June, the Commission presented a Communication on its strategy for the

multi-annual cod and hake recovery plans as a basis for consultations with Member States and the industry. It set out the rationale behind the plans and looked at the measures already in place and at those likely to be required to help the recovery of the depleted stocks as well as their likely impact on sections of the fleet.

Bringing in multi-annual management processes

To ensure the effectiveness of and coherence between these measures, the Commission intends to introduce multi-annual management processes into the recovery plans. This approach is already applied to a lesser extent for stocks in the North Sea (except for whiting) and in the Baltic for cod, sprat and salmon.

The Commission foresees that the Council would commit itself to fixing TACs in accordance with a pre-determined rate of fishing mortality for each of the stocks concerned for the duration of the recovery plans. It is crucial, of course, that this mortality rate is based on scientific advice. Fishing effort or fishing activities should then be adjusted according to the TACs.

Although the annual TAC may vary from year to year because of short-term (and not easily predictable) changes in recruitment to the stock concerned, it would always reflect the constant fishing mortality rate that is judged to be appropriate to ensure stock recovery.

This would involve low TACs for the foreseeable future for cod and hake and also proportionally reduced TACs for associated species.

Reconciling long-term objectives and short-term sacrifice

Policy-makers and stakeholders have been confronted with the difficulty of reconciling the long-term objective of rebuilding these stocks with the immediate sacrifice which such measures impose on the fleets concerned. But the fishing industry has its back to the wall. The fishing fleet is much larger than is needed to exploit the available resources. To be economically sustainable, the EU fishing sector will inevitably have to become smaller.

The Commission seeks to share the sacrifice as equally as is feasible. The debate about the recovery plans shows how stark this choice is. Each fishery sector concerned has complained to the Commission that some measure or other discriminates against it but the truth is that none of the fleets concerned is immune from the consequences of the measures.

When deciding on the definitive recovery plans for cod and hake, the Council will have to reconsider the choices already made by the Commission concerning derogations under the emergency measures.

Member States will need to review their funding priorities under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance, which provides EU financial support for measures ranging from the decommissioning of fishing vessels to retraining for those leaving the industry. Support is also available to help finance early retirement schemes.

Looking to the future

There is no denying that there are tough times ahead for the fisheries sector. However, this must not prevent decision-makers from taking the measures that are needed. The full co-operation of fishermen is just as crucial to the success of these measures. The perilous state of so many fish stocks shows that old patterns of behaviour have to be changed. There is no alternative: our assets must be rebuilt. ■



How have the closures affected the industry?

A Belgian inspector: *"Fishermen generally complied and cooperated".*

During the ten-week period when a protection area in the North Sea was closed to cod fisheries, Sven Tahon, a Belgian inspector, spent most of his time monitoring the southern zone of the exclusion area on board a Belgian Navy vessel. Very few offences were observed: *"In the first few days we did intercept a number of sports fishermen who claimed not to know anything about the ban, but apart from that no fishermen entered the zone except to pass through. This emergency measure was generally respected by most professionals who were happy to see that it applied to all Member States."* It must be said that Belgian fishermen were able to go to other areas, such as the Bay of Biscay, the Bristol Channel and the Irish Sea. *"That meant that we were not faced with shortages back on land and the kind of critical situation experienced by Denmark,"* the inspector continued. Highly positive, Sven Tahon also noted that this was an excellent exercise in inter-Member State cooperation: *"We share this zone with the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, with France. Thanks to the excellent co-ordination we were able to ensure a round-the-clock presence which was shared equally. We called it Operation Shark."*