

# Cod fishing

## What does the future hold?

**In an opinion published on 25 October 2002, ICES, an independent scientific organisation, recommended the total closure of several cod fisheries in European Union waters. The reason: population levels had hit a new low. Two weeks later, the Commission's scientific body, the STECF, endorsed the moratorium proposed by the ICES, acknowledging that this would be the most effective measure. Aware of the dramatic impact such a decision would have on many coastal zones, the Commission explored other less drastic avenues, among them the early implementation of a tougher recovery plan and the establishment of floor-level TACs.**

Fishermen are not the only stakeholders shouldering the blame: the weaknesses of the management system and those responsible for fisheries management have to bear part of the responsibility for today's situation. Indeed, past technical and emergency measures have not produced the expected results. Environmental problems, such as pollution and warmer water temperatures, are also contributing factors. It is nevertheless undeniable that years of overfishing and ineffective Member State control are largely to blame. The numbers of young fish left to build stocks back up are very low, primarily because there are not enough adult fish left to lay eggs.

As early as December 2001, the Commission proposed long-term recovery measures for cod and hake, which were in imminent danger of collapse. More recently, under its proposals for reform of the CFP, the Commission tabled additional measures aimed at providing a solution to this over-exploitation. One such was the idea of multi-annual management plans involving

a number of elements, including a reduction in fishing effort, the shutdown of certain zones and stronger control, the readjustment of public aid schemes and the participation of stakeholders in decision-making.

The Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) reacted to the alarming ICES opinion by confirming the cause for concern and endorsing the proposed moratorium, explaining that this is the one measure most likely to produce positive results. But what impact would it have on fishing communities? The disappearance of a food resource as vital as cod would provoke social and economic upheaval. This is why the Commission wanted to find a solution making it possible both to protect the resource effectively and sustainably and to safeguard the sector against such a cataclysm.

So the European Commission brainstormed with those in the sector to come up with an alternative to a moratorium, seen as too radical. It came up with a dual approach comprising the establishment of a management model that would permit continued fishing at very reduced levels, and the programming of Structural Funds into new socio-economic flanking measures.

The overriding consideration is to permit the most threatened stocks of cod to recover, at least to a level where the initially proposed recovery measures can be implemented with some hope of success. Thus, on a proposal from the Commission, the Council of Fisheries Ministers adopted a decision introducing, on 1 February 2003, measures combining a significant reduction

in fishing possibilities for cod and related species (especially whiting and haddock), a reduction in fishing effort according to the fishing gear used and tougher controls. These measures concern stocks of cod and associated species in the North Sea, west of Scotland, Skagerrak and Kattegat. In the Irish Sea, the technical measures applied to cod fishing in 2002 will be maintained. Meanwhile, the recovery plans proposed in 2001 will be adapted with a view to a Council decision by 31 March 2003 and implementation from 1 July 2003. The Commission will seek scientific advice on whether other technical measures, such as the shutdown of certain fisheries zones, should also be proposed.

*Strict measures are needed to safeguard resources.*

