

# Discards



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Many European fisheries are essentially mixed fisheries, where several different species are found in the same area in such a way that it makes it almost impossible to target one species to the exclusion of others. The scale of these associated catches in EU waters poses a particular challenge for sustainable fisheries management.

Marine organisms which are caught during a fishing operation, whether they were targeted or not, may end up being discarded, i.e. returned to the sea, most commonly for reasons connected either with market considerations or with management measures. Every year, this is the fate of a substantial proportion of the catch taken by European boats – between 10% and 60%, depending on the fishery. In the North Sea alone, annual discards are estimated at 500 000 to 800 000 tonnes. Nor is the EU unique. According to the FAO, the worldwide discard rate (by weight) is estimated at 8% of the total catch – an average yearly amount of 7.3 million tonnes.

Yet discarding is inherently a waste of resources and of fishers' effort. It undermines the future health of stocks, reduces

operators' potential earnings and disrupts the balance of the marine eco-system.

In March 2007, the European Commission set out a plan to reduce unwanted catches and eliminate discards in EU fisheries. Discard bans are not new: they have already been introduced in some fisheries and species in Norway, Iceland, Canada and New Zealand. However, existing bans tend to be in single species fisheries, and can be implemented without the complications faced by the EU's mixed fisheries, especially in the case of demersal stocks.

## Why are fish thrown overboard?

There are two main types of driver for discarding: economic, and regulatory.

### Economic

- There may be little or no market for some species and/or sizes.
- Some marketable fish are discarded in order to enable the operator to maximise the quantity of other, more valuable species in the catch, or more valuable specimens of the same species (highgrading).

### Regulatory

- In mixed fisheries when a quota for one species is exhausted or a vessel does not have an allocation for a species caught, it has two ways of proceeding: either it stops fishing altogether, or it continues fishing for other species while discarding those for which it has no quota.
- Use of minimum landing sizes can lead to discards, especially in mixed fisheries where species of different adult sizes are caught together.

## What are discards?

The FAO describes discards as 'that proportion of the total organic material of animal origin in the catch, which is thrown away, or dumped at sea for whatever reason. It does not include plant material and post harvest waste such as offal. The discards may be dead or alive.'

## Discards

### Negative consequences of discarding

Discarding unwanted catches has many negative environmental and economic consequences, especially as very few fish discarded will actually survive.

- Discarding juveniles means lower future catch opportunities and reduced spawning biomass.
- Discarding mature individuals weakens the stock's productivity in the short as well as the long term.
- Discarding fish, crustaceans, sea birds, sea mammals and non-targeted species undermines the balance of the marine ecosystem.
- Some species can become severely depleted by being taken as an associated catch even in the absence of any directed fishery (e.g. certain sharks and rays).
- For fishermen, discarding is a waste of time and effort in the present, as well as representing a serious potential loss of future income.

### Change of tack

The Commission is at the moment reconsidering its discard policy. The philosophy underpinning the Commission's initiative on discarding represents a major shift in European fisheries management. Instead of trying to manage what is landed the focus will change to managing what is caught. When it comes to translating this approach into practice, there are several options currently being considered. These range from technical measures to improve selectivity to incentives for research on different policy options. Even the possibility of a discard ban in the long term is a hypothesis that has not been excluded.

While the Commission sees reducing excessive fishing effort as the main way to reduce the level of unwanted catch, other measures should also be considered, such as:

- temporary closure of zones where a high proportion of juveniles are found;
- moving vessels to another fishing area once their unwanted catches exceed a certain level;
- adapting fishing gear so that threatened species or juveniles can escape from nets;
- reviewing existing management measures which may lead to discarding.



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### Data on discards

**Northeast Atlantic:**  
1 332 000 tonnes overall  
(equivalent to some 13 % of all fish caught in the area).

**West of Ireland and Scotland:**  
rates vary between 31 % and 90 %  
depending on the stock.

**Mediterranean and Black Sea:**  
180 000 tonnes (just below 5 %  
of total catches).

### Documents

Commission communication: A policy to reduce unwanted by-catches and eliminate discards in European fisheries, COM(2007) 136 final, 28.3.2007.

Commission staff working document, SEC(2007) 380, 28.3.2007.