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Opening the dialogue for eliminating discards

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Stakeholders' hearing on discards

Brussels, 3 May 2011

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you all for taking the time today to discuss with us how to eliminate discarding. I am glad that you have turned up in such high numbers, because it shows that you are as concerned about this important issue as we are. It is an issue that has made more than half a million people from the UK sign a letter to me asking to end discards as a top priority in the reform of our policy.

I know that many among you are happy about this UK initiative and about the publicity that Hugh's Fish fight has brought on the issue of discarding fish.

But I also know that there are many others here today who follow the discussion on discarding with some mistrust. Some among you think and have said so that the Commission is showing a knee-jerk reaction to a media hype in the UK when we say that we need to tackle this problem of discards once and for all. I can almost hear you thinking "Here they go again. First they preach that they want to stop the top down approach of rules being pushed onto the fishing industry and that they want a bottom up approach with initiatives coming from the industry themselves. But when it comes to discards the Commission preaches water, but it drinks wine."

Let me tell you that I can understand this.

I can understand that some among you prefer to continue the initiatives that we have seen emerge in the EU fishing industry to decrease discards.

I can understand that many here prefer to continue with a slower pace and without being in the spotlight. I really do.

But there is also something you have to understand and that is that times have changed. We don't have time. Our stocks are in difficult position. The great majority of our fishermen, specially the coastal fishermen are complaining that there is no fish in the sea.

We are also faced with a strong public opinion of consumers. Consumers who are very well informed and want to know that they are not supporting wasteful practises when they buy fish. We need to acknowledge that many of these consumers think that we are moving too slow. Why do we need to acknowledge that? Because they are the ones who buy your products, because they are the market force and we cannot ignore them.

But it is not just about the consumers, it is also about good old common sense. If we are hauling up fish, it mostly dies in the process and throwing it back doesn't help anybody. It is actually worse than landing it. Why? Because if the boxes stay empty there are ever more hauls and ever more discards until the boxes are filled and the vessels return to port. That is the bitter reality and it is there to stay, unless we change it.

Therefore, what we have to do is to give fish back it's good name. This is important for the fishing industry and it is important for coastal communities. But it is also important for consumers. The fishing industry in Europe provides a healthy choice for EU consumers. It provides food high in DHA, a fatty acid that is essential for good brain and heart functions at all ages. I don't want consumers to turn away from the healthy choice in the supermarket shelves, because they become increasingly uncomfortable buying fish. We cannot afford taking this risk.

Therefore there is only one way out and that is to face the problem head on and fish for the consumers. We live in a hungry world and we cannot keep a policy that obliges fishermen to throw away perfectly good food. Just look at the picture behind me showing fishermen throwing away big cod, because they ran out of quota. There is no way that we can explain this to the people on the street.

But of course I am aware of the complexity and the difficulties of this decision. We need you because without your cooperation the decisions will be an empty shell. We can also not keep a policy that micromanages the industry from Brussels and prescribes down to the tiniest detail what gear they can use, when they can use it, where and for how long. This is just madness.

We need to find a new way and this requires an effort by all of us. Legislators must establish a new legal framework that removes all compulsory discarding. We also need clear objectives and time limits. And the fishing industry should devise ways in which the fish they don't want, is simply not caught in the first place. Or if it is caught we can help them to build storage mechanisms, to wait for a better price.

Now, some of you might think: we already have such initiatives; surely we've made some progress... European Fisheries Technology Platform has provided a very good document. So, yes it is true, to date we know of 47 projects across Europe, which collect data on discarding, try more selective fishing techniques and make use of landings. Two of these will be presented to us today.

Some fishermen participate in trials with CCTV where all catches are landed and counted against the quotas.

In other cases industry and scientists, working together, have come up with new nets for beam trawls which reduce discards by nearly 70%.

The problem is that those laudable initiatives are still scattered, localised interventions. There is no generalisation, no level playing field, and no proper framework across EU waters.

And therefore despite the good intentions, our gradual and 'voluntary' approach has not given the results we had hoped for.

This is why I have organised our discussion today on how we can move forward and eliminate discards step by step, covering one type of fisheries at a time. There is one thing that I would like to be very clear about: the calendar to end discards with specific end dates per fisheries has to be decided top down, there is no other way about it. I am here to pay attention to your opinions about the calendar before our decisions. But the decision is a political responsibility and has to be taken by the European Institutions, Commission, Council, and Parliament. Then the fishing industry would design the specific measures for better selectivity in a bottom up approach.

Today we would like to hear your views on how we could get to such a system. How can we spread the good initiatives from the industry on a wider scale and how can we ensure a level playing field? Is self management by the industry an idea to achieve this and can this include controls by the fishermen themselves? And what incentives can we put in place to increase compliance?

What about industry agreements on using specific gears or agreements on not fishing in specific areas where there are many juveniles for example? And can a regionalised CFP help to achieve this?

Looking at the marketing side, how can we best use the catches that are unavoidable even when using selective gear? In the UK sales of lesser known fish have gone up 45% after the recent TV shows on sustainable consumption. I believe that if it can work in the UK, it can work elsewhere.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am about to present an ambitious reform of the Common Fisheries Policy that will have sustainability written all over it. If it fails to do away with discards, an essential ingredient will be missing. Discards are bad for the stocks and bad for fishermen.

We can't afford to fail on this. With consumers changing their behaviour and retailers responding to sustainability concerns we must adapt to the demand and we should not try to drive markets by supply. Today we want to hear your views. We need your know how and constructive input.

The floor is yours.

Thank you.