A better future for the EU deep sea [1]

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The European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission today reached an agreement on how to better protect deep-sea fish, sponges and corals while maintaining the viability of the European fishing industry. The agreement brings the EU rules on deep-sea fisheries, which date back to 2003, in line with the sustainability targets enshrined in the EU's reformed Common Fisheries Policy.

EU Commissioner Karmenu Vella stated: "I am glad that an agreement was reached today. As Commissioner in charge of both fisheries and the protection of the environment, I believe that we have achieved a balanced compromise that will protect our deep-sea environment and deep-sea fish stocks while finally putting an end to the uncertainty faced by European fishermen looking to run a successful and sustainable business."

The text agreed contains a number of provisions that will help better protect the European deep seas. From now on, fishermen may only target deep-sea fish in areas where they have fished in the past (their so-called 'fishing footprint'), thereby ensuring that pristine environments remain untouched. Trawls below 800m will be banned completely in EU waters, and areas with vulnerable marine environments (VMEs) will be closed to bottom fishing below 400m. To further protect VMEs, fishermen will have to report how many deep-sea sponges or corals they catch and move on to other fishing grounds in case a certain maximum amount has been reached.

These measures are complemented by a reinforced observers' scheme that will improve the scientific understanding of the deep sea. Finally, specific measures, for example landings in designated ports, will be taken to improve enforcement and control. Fishing authorisations may ultimately be withdrawn in case of failure to comply with the new rules.

In 2012, the Commission had proposed a package which included the full phasing out over two years of deep-sea gears in contact with the sea bottom. This proposal was rejected by the Council and the Parliament. Today's agreement offers alternative protection measures.

Background

Deep-sea species are caught in deep waters in the Atlantic beyond the main fishing grounds on the continental shelves, in depths up to 1500 metres. This is a fragile environment which, once damaged, is unlikely to recover. Highly vulnerable to fishing, deep-sea fish stocks are quick to collapse and slow to recover because they reproduce at low rates.
Deep-sea fisheries in the North-East Atlantic are pursued in EU waters, including the outermost regions of Portugal and Spain, and in international waters governed by conservation measures adopted within the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), in which the EU participates along with the other countries fishing in the area.

Fishing for deep-sea species has been regulated by the European Union since 2003. Deep-sea fisheries account for about 1% of fish landed from the North-East Atlantic. The catches – and related jobs – have been declining for years, due to depleted stocks. The poor state of key deep-sea stocks and the lack of scientific data clearly demonstrated that a better management framework for deep-sea fisheries was necessary.

More information


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