Management and conservation of deep-sea stock

By WWF
(Observer NGO)

Background

This submission is related to draft agenda item 7 (f). It equally applies to deep-water fisheries and/or deep-sea species in EC waters and in the NEAFC Regulatory area.

In the context of the ongoing review of the EC Regulation with regard to TACs for deep-water fisheries and in the light of the existing EC Regulation with regard to fishing effort for deep-sea stocks, WWF has recently provided the briefing attached to this submission as Annex. This briefing also makes reference to pertinent ICES advice.

Since deep-water fisheries in the North-East Atlantic are co-managed by the EC and NEAFC, WWF urges both fisheries authorities to coherently implement its recommendations for management and conservation.

Action requested

NEAFC is invited to take note of WWF’s briefing and to consider the recommendations contained when discussing management measures for deep-sea species.
Management and conservation of deep-sea stock


According to scientific advice most deep-water species are at present believed to be over-exploited. Deep-sea fish stocks are inherently vulnerable and experience show that deep-sea stocks can be depleted very quickly, even within a single season. Stocks of certain species (e.g. red sea bream, blue ling and orange roughy) are known to have collapsed in some areas, and there is insufficient data on other stocks to determine what level of fishing would be sustainable. Recovery will be extremely slow, as these stocks generally have a high proportion of old fish, their reproduction rate is low, and regeneration and growth are slow.

The review of Council Regulation 2340/2002 this autumn gives the ideal opportunity for the Commission and Member States to improve existing management and manage the deep-water stocks in a truly precautionary way.

Deep sea stocks are currently managed by two Council Regulations:

i) Council Regulation 2340/2002 on deep-water fisheries was implemented in January 2003 setting TACs for the following stocks; Black scabbardfish, Blue ling, Greater silver smelt, Ling, Orange roughy, Red seabream, Roundnose grenadier and Tusk in certain fishing zones. This regulation also required the use by member states of observers onboard fishing vessels to gather data for the review of the regulation in 2004. For 2003 and 2004 “precautionary” TACs were set for Greater silver smelt, Orange roughy and Red seabream in some fishing zones, although not reflecting the uncertainty of the stocks. The TAC set for 2003 and 2004 was set as a “precautionary” TAC for Greater silver smelt, Orange roughy and Red seabream in some fishing zones, although not reflecting the uncertainty of the stocks.

ii) Council Regulation 2347/2002 controls fishing effort for deep sea stocks by stipulating that vessels must carry a special deep-water licence. Total tonnage and power of vessels licensed to fish in deep water is capped at the maximum level recorded in 2000.
Developments in most recent years prior to 2003 entailed the expansion in some fisheries (e.g. Orange roughy), whereas most others continued at more or less the same levels of landings. The introduction of unilateral or internationally agreed TACs in 2003 may have curbed the expansion of some fisheries. In the NEAFC regulatory area, effort was recommended to be frozen in 2003 and 2004. But as in 2002 few satisfactory stock assessments could be made in 2004, and information on exploitation rates remains uncertain. Applying the precautionary approach, and given that no new assessments could be made, the conclusion on stock status in 2004 remains similar to that made in 2002.

ICES advice in 2004 and earlier years has made it clear that deep-water fisheries need to be managed in a more precautionary way than at present, with the use of capacity and effort reduction, as the main management methods. For the ten stocks assessed none of the representative data made it possible for ICES to give any advice on the status of the stocks. Recommendations were based on great uncertainty and were to stop fishing for some of the stocks, reduce effort by 30-50% and introduce closed areas for spawning aggregations. It was also stressed that fishing should not be carried out unless accompanied by a comprehensive monitoring programme. ICES stated:

“We are particularly concerned about deep sea fish stocks because they are so vulnerable to overfishing. ICES have been advising reductions in fishing effort as a precaution for many years now, but deep sea fisheries have continued to grow. We hope that this year our advice will be listened to so that these fisheries can be put on a more sustainable level”.

Consistent with the precautionary approach, ICES recommends an immediate reduction in established deep-sea fisheries unless they can be shown to be sustainable. New deep-sea fisheries or the expansion of existing fisheries into new fishing areas should not be permitted unless the expansion is cautious, meaning that they need to be accompanied by programmes to collect sufficient data to determine sustainable exploitation levels. With respect to advice on specific stocks, ICES recommended for ling and tusk (which are taken together in many fisheries) that the advised effort reduction, calculated on the basis of ling should apply to all fisheries taking ling and tusk as their main catch. Technical measures such as closed areas on spawning aggregations should also be implemented to minimize catches of stocks currently exploited in mixed fisheries.
Recommendations

WWF urges the Commission and Member States to fulfil their obligations under the Common Fisheries Policy to sustainable fisheries and the precautionary approach to fisheries management and adopt a regulation that reflects the vulnerable status of deep-water stocks that are currently overexploited. To ensure sustainable fisheries in the future the precautionary approach will have to be underpinned by the following measures, which need to be included in any management regime for deep-water stocks:

- Deep-water sharks, rays and chimaeras (known to be taken in deep-water fisheries) need to be included in a management system based on effort limitation and closed areas. According to scientific data these species are considered to be particularly at risk for overexploitation and it is therefore urgent that the conservation of deep-water sharks are given proper attention in the review of the regulation.

- Immediate steps should be taken to ensure that accurate species-specific catch data is available for all species landed or discarded by deep-water fisheries.

- The licensing system for deep-water vessels should be strengthened to deliver reductions in effort rather than simply capping effort at pre-2000 levels. Such a system would be more effective than TACs in reducing effort in the mixed deep-water fishery, as TACs result in excessive discarding, high-grading and misreporting and serve only as a system of allocation, not conservation.

- The introduction of gear limitations for longliners (limits on the numbers of hooks) and gill-netters (limits of nets) fishing in deep water. In addition an assessment should be made of the impact of these gear on certain habitat types such as deepwater corals and other sensitive bottom fauna that can be found on sea mounts.

- A general ban on trawling for deep-water species and around seamounts should be introduced and expansion into new areas prohibited.

- Closed areas should be introduced based on the data collected by the observer programme in 2003 and 2004, which gives information on aggregation areas of juvenile and spawning grounds.
As deep-water fisheries are co-managed with NEAFC there is a need for the Commission to advocate the above priorities within NEAFC to ensure that the deep-water fisheries are managed in a truly precautionary way.