

STUDY SUMMARY

It's there for a reason: Why Ministers must not exceed scientific advice on fishing quota

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Summary

On December 16 and 17, EU fisheries ministers will set fishing quotas for the North Sea and Northeast Atlantic. This meeting will largely determine whether the reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy will succeed or fail in the objective to end overfishing in EU waters.

While EU Ministers have put off action to end overfishing by 2020, there are countless positive reasons why reaching the deadline should be embraced. The briefing *It's there for a reason: Why Ministers must not exceed scientific advice on fishing quota* explains that ending overfishing brings environmental, social, and economic benefits. And it is also the law. This document summarises the briefing's arguments.

Environmental benefits: Abundant marine life in a more resilient ecosystem

For most EU commercial fish stocks, fishing pressure is managed through quota limits – a maximum quantity of fish that can be caught. Research has demonstrated that if and when fishing quotas are set in accordance with scientific advice, stock recovery follows.

There is a growing recognition that it is difficult to manage fish populations separately and instead a multispecies or 'ecosystem-based approach' should be employed. Studies using this approach show that for some populations to be caught at their maximum yield, others must be caught below their maximum yield – meaning quotas set below the scientific advice.

Fishing is not the only stressor in marine ecosystems. Increasingly, climate change is being cited as a major stressor as fish populations shift poleward. Ending overfishing can help mitigate this problem by building resilience through larger and more abundant marine life.

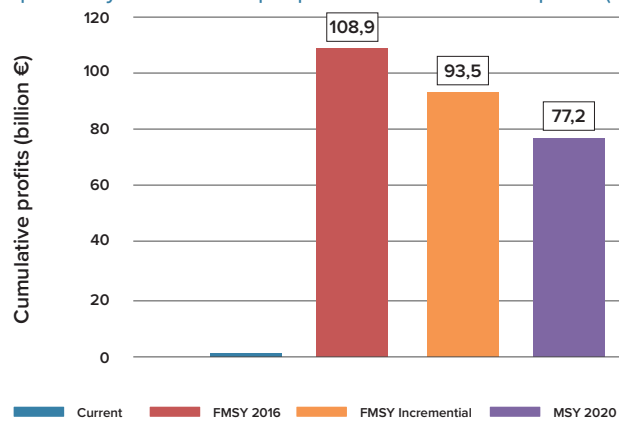
Rebuilding fish populations would end the 'boom and bust' of current management. With many fish populations still in a fragile state of recovery, fishing at the limit of scientific advice can risk overfishing. This has led to the recent MSC certification and subsequent removal for North Sea cod.

Socio-economic benefits: Larger catches from fewer trips

Often policies to protect the environment are contrasted with their financial costs. This is not the case for overexploited renewable resources. Allowing fish populations to recover increases the abundance and thus a sustainable level of harvest comes from a larger base (for example 10% of 100,000 tonnes instead of 20% from 20,000 tonnes). By protecting fish populations, we can fish more in the future with more income for fishers and coastal communities.

Fishing from more abundant fish populations also reduces costs, as abundant populations are easier to harvest (you can haul the same amount of fish in a smaller area and in less time). These returns to fishing can occur as profits or alternatively as jobs or wages depending on how the fleet is structured and labour policy. Measured in profits, studies have found that the earlier MSY is achieved the better, finding that achieving MSY in 2020 instead of 2016 would already result in more than 31% of the potential operating profit being lost (see Figure 1).

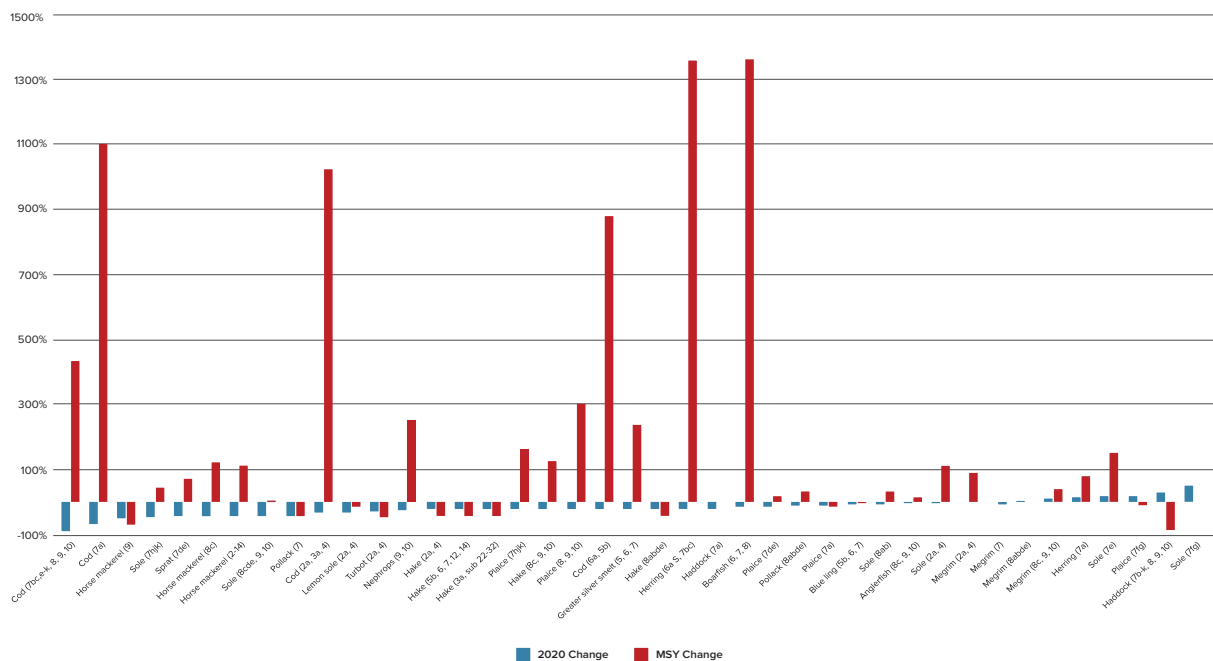
Figure 1: Net present value of MSY pathways under the proportional cost assumption (2016-2035)



Source: Using the proportional costs assumption from Guillen, J. et al. (2016). Sustainability now or later? Estimating the benefits of pathways to maximum sustainable yield for EU northeast Atlantic fisheries. Marine Policy 72: 40-47.

Figure 2 displays the proposed quota changes under the Commission quota proposal for the North Sea and Northeast Atlantic (blue) beside the estimated quotas at a state of MSY (red) compared to 2019. It is clear that in the majority of cases the MSY value is many times greater than the cases where there are reductions proposed (10.3 times greater, on average). Importantly, these higher MSY values are recurring.

Figure 2: Proposed TAC changes and MSY potential



Source: European Commission. (2019). Commission proposes fishing opportunities in the Atlantic and North Sea for 2020. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6151 and Froese, R. et al. (2016). Exploitation and status of European stocks. Madrid: Oceana. Retrieved from: <https://eu.oceana.org/en/our-work/froese-report/overview>
Note: Where stocks cover multiple TACs, conversions were made based on the current TAC proportions as in Guillen et al, 2016.

The meaning of law

Putting off action for so long that it becomes ever more 'costly' to comply creates a moral hazard – where excessive risks are taken in the knowledge that the costs will be borne by someone else. If the landmark 2020 deadline isn't met, why would any other policy in the Common Fisheries Policy be trusted? Or what about other EU policies?

It would be a disappointment and frustration to the millions of EU citizens who put their hopes in the CFP reform to come up short in this objective. We are watching with great hope and expectation.