

EU ignores calls for cod fishing ban

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EU fisheries ministers today ignored the advice of scientists and environmental campaigners and rejected a total ban on cod fishing in a new agreement on fish quotas.

Following 12 hours of talks, they instead opted for a 14% cut in the cod catch and a reduction of between 7% and 10% in the number of days fishermen are allowed at sea.

Currently, fishermen are allowed up to 15 days a month, depending on the type of fishing gear and the exact fishing ground.

The deal also increased catch quotas for hake, prawns, mackerel and monkfish.

The British fisheries minister, Ben Bradshaw, hailed the agreement as good for conservation and for the UK fleet.

However, fishermen were angered by the cut in fishing days, and environmental campaigners said the deal was a "disgrace" that would push cod to extinction in British waters.

"Reducing cod quotas by only 14% will accelerate the pace towards the species' commercial extinction," Carol Phua, the World Wildlife Fund fisheries policy officer, said.

The organisation's fisheries officer, Tom Pickerell, added: "The scientists must wonder why they bother with their surveys."

Willie Mackenzie, the Greenpeace oceans campaigner, warned that cod in the North Sea would be "wiped out" if fishing was allowed to continue.

"Fisheries ministers across Europe have ignored the warnings of their own scientists of a need for a 'zero-catch' allowance for North Sea cod," he added.

"They are completely failing to deal with the cod crisis, and it's entirely obvious that responsibility should be taken from them. It's high time environment ministers stepped in to protect cod and defend the oceans."

Earlier this week, Greenpeace staged a symbolic funeral for the "last cod".

Bertie Armstrong, the chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, said: "There is no point in having quotas if we are physically incapacitated in the days we can catch it.

"There is huge disappointment within the industry, and there will be some anger in elements of the fishing fleet that are affected by the decision to reduce days at sea."

Mr Armstrong said today's decision meant that the number of days at sea for fishermen had halved over the last five years.

However, Mr Bradshaw said it would have been "irresponsible" not to have any cut in fishing days at all, given the continued poor state of the cod stocks.

He said smaller quotas for over-fished cod had been balanced by bigger quotas for many other, more plentiful species, insisting record prices for fish meant incomes should increase.

Before the talks began, the European commission recommended a 25% cut in the permitted maximum cod catch in 2007, coupled with a 20% cut in the number of days fishermen go to sea.

In an effort to protect the fishing industry, ministers opted for less severe cuts.

Mr Bradshaw said the UK had been ready to endure a tougher cod reduction in the name of conservation, not least because the state of many other stocks would allow real increases in catch allowances next year.

He admitted there was still no significant recovery in sight for North Sea cod, although the birth rate of baby cod last year was the highest recorded for a decade.

For the UK fleet, the other most significant results from the talks were:

- A 20% increase for south-west England hake catches.
- A 17% increase for Irish Sea prawns.
- A 13% increase for mackerel.
- A 10% rise in North Sea and west of Scotland monkfish catches.
- A 6% increase for south-west England monkfish.

Mr Bradshaw today argued that the UK white fish fleet had already achieved its target for reducing cod fishing effort - via boat decommissioning, reduction in days at sea and natural wastage - by 65%.

Other national fleets had not reached that figure and should bear the brunt of any further cuts next year, he said.