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# EU fisheries reform would 'privatise oceans'

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News



SPL The proposals aim to end discarding in EU

waters

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The European Commission is planning to reform the EU's fishing industry by giving vessels quota shares guaranteed for periods of at least 15 years.

The commission will issue a proposal on [reforming the Common Fisheries Policy \(CFP\)](#) in July, to take effect in 2013.

But a draft obtained by BBC News outlines moves that some environmentalists describe as "virtual privatisation of the oceans".

Final decisions on fishing quotas will stay with politicians, not scientists.

The 28-year-old CFP is intended to keep catches within sustainable limits, but has often been

criticised for doing the opposite.

One of the central planks of the proposed reforms is to eliminate discards, by switching to quota systems based on how many fish are landed in port rather than how many are caught.

Up to half the catch of some species has to be discarded because vessels have exceeded their quota, or because the fish are undersized.

Other ambitions include:

- setting up "multi-annual plans" to restore fish stocks "based on the precautionary approach"
- restoring fisheries to a level that provides maximum sustainable yield (MSY) - the level that will produce as many fish as possible each year without causing the stock to decline - "not later than 2015"
- allowing nations to incentivise use of selective fishing gear.

But according to Markus Knigge of the Pew Environment Group, this is not ambitious enough to restore life in Europe's seas to its full vitality.

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## “Start Quote

Fish stocks are a public resource, we all own them; and this is the virtual privatisation of the oceans”

End Quote Markus Knigge Pew Environment Group

"Two years ago the commission published a highly critical assessment of the CFP, explaining why it was failing to manage fish stocks sustainably," he told BBC News.

"Our feeling is that the current draft proposal is not going to remedy this failure."

However, Bertie Armstrong, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, suggested some of the ideals were too lofty.

"The scientists are telling everybody that MSY for all stocks at all times is an impossibility, and certainly by 2015," he said.

He is also concerned that centrally determined rules will be imposed across EU waters without taking account of local needs and practices.

Bargain corner

The CFP has seen an annual ritual played out in which scientists recommend lowering quotas for some species - down to zero in a number of cases - only for ministers of EU member states to then award their fleets higher quotas than the scientists have recommended as safe.

Boris Worm, a noted fisheries scientist from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, said stronger systems did exist elsewhere that the EU could adopt.

"The ideal situation is the one you have in the US, where if a fish stock falls below a certain level it simply can't be fished - there's no wiggle room, no bargaining about a quota," he said.

"If the CFP retains the status quo, where scientific advice may or may not be followed

depending on politicians, that may not address overfishing in Europe."



Fisheries commissioner Maria

Damanaki is due to unveil final proposals in July

The draft proposal would allow the commission to take "emergency measures" unilaterally - but routine decision-making would be led by the Council of Ministers.

EU Fisheries Commissioner Maria Damanaki has previously said she was impressed by the scale of public opposition to discards across the EU, with more than half a million people signing [a petition](#) publicised by UK "celebrity chef" Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

The draft proposal envisages phasing in a complete discard ban, obliging vessels to "record and land" all catches.

This would apply to species including mackerel, herring and tunas from the beginning of 2014.

Cod, hake and sole would follow a year later, with virtually every other commercial species coming under the regulation from 2016.

Precisely how this would be policed is not entirely clear; and fishermen's groups are already lobbying against it, especially in areas such as the North Sea where many target species swim together.

"If you're going to have a blanket discard ban applied by the start of 2015, that is the bluntest of blunt instruments," said Mr Armstrong.

"No fisherman can say, 'I will go out today and I will catch only haddock' - that's just impossible - and under the present regulations, the only way is to stop fishing when you reach your first quota."

The commission document does not spell out how a discard ban can be implemented in such a way as to give skippers flexibility in these mixed fisheries.

#### Private concerns

Arguably the draft proposal's most dramatic impact would be the mandatory adoption of individual transferable quotas (ITQs) "for all fishing vessels of 12m or more... and for all

fishing vessels under 12m length fishing with towed gear [such as trawls]."

Skippers would be guaranteed shares of national quotas for periods of at least 15 years, which they could trade among themselves - even, if the national government agrees, trading with fleets from other countries.

This is already practised on a smaller scale in a number of EU member states including the UK, but has been taken much further in countries such as Iceland and New Zealand.

[A global survey published three years ago](#) showed that fisheries managed using ITQs were half as likely to collapse as others, which is one of the reasons for the commission's enthusiasm.

But the blanket nature of its proposal has raised some concern among scientists and environmentalists.

"The experience shows that ITQs are not necessarily a way to save fish," said Dr Worm.

"It gives planning security to the industry, but it comes at a social cost - you end up with fewer operators, probably lower employment in the fishing sector, and probably concentration of shares in the hands of people who are good at acquiring them.

"To have ITQs mandated for all vessels over 12m in Europe - that seems a little strong to me."

Markus Knigge went further.

"Fish stocks are a public resource, we all own them; and access to this resource should be given to those who demonstrate they fish in the most environmental and socially beneficial ways, and it should not be for any great length of time," he said.

"This is the virtual privatisation of the oceans."

The commission's draft is currently being discussed by EU member states and European parliamentarians, and to a certain extent by stakeholders including fishermen and conservation groups.

Following publication of the final version in July, there is likely to be even more strident debate before the reform package is agreed in 2013.