



WWF

ANALYSIS

DECEMBER

2012

# LEGALISED OVERFISHING

## Summary

- European Member States have been overfishing European waters for too long
- Over the past nine years fisheries ministers have only followed **scientific advice in 13%** of their decisions; and concerning fishing quotas, ministers' have decided quotas on average **45% higher** than the recommended scientific advice
- The current problem of overfishing will prove devastating to European fish stocks and the long term prospects of the fishing industry unless the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) ensures that fish stocks are recovered to and managed at sustainable levels
- The scientific case is clear – it is now up to MEPs and the Member States to ensure responsible reform to safeguard our fish stocks and sustainable fishing

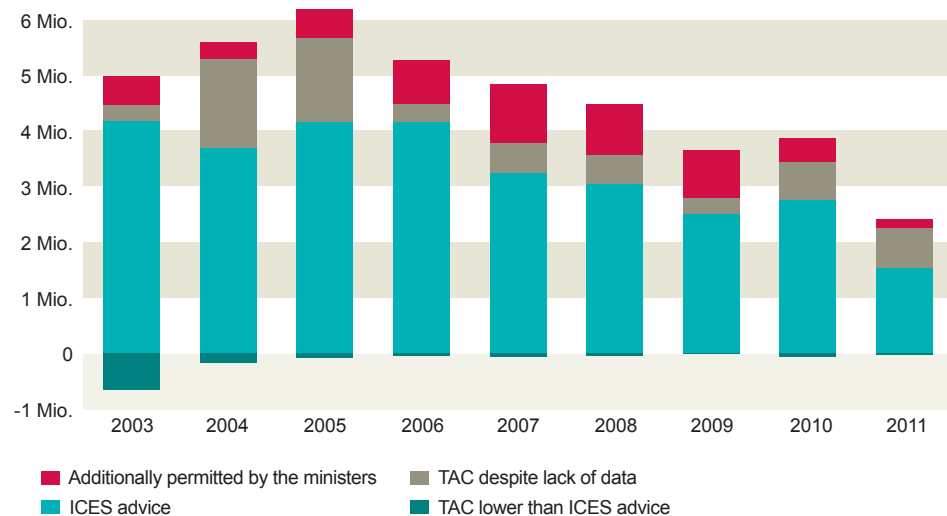
## Introduction

Overfishing is a serious global issue that is drastically affecting fish stocks. We are now paying the price for over-intensive fishing that has gone on unchecked for decades. The current situation is simply not sustainable, if fish stocks are to be replenished and we want to avoid the depletion of many fish that we currently take for granted in our diets. Currently, 30% of global fish stocks are overfished<sup>1</sup>. The situation is particularly dire in Europe where almost half the stocks (47%) in the northeast Atlantic are considered to be overfished. In the Mediterranean this figure is as high as 80%<sup>2</sup>.

**Fisheries ministers have only followed scientific advice in 1 out of 10 political decisions**

## Structure of total fish quota (TAC) for 107 fish stocks in the North Atlantic

**Fig. 1:** The total fish quantity in tons per year approved for catch, broken down into total allowable catch (TAC - blue), the catch that was permitted without scientific advice (grey) as well as the catch additionally permitted by ministers (red). Over the nine-year period, the red areas amount to 6.2 million tons of fish.



1) FAO, Rome 2012. The State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture.

2) European Commission 2012. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL concerning a consultation on Fishing Opportunities for 2012 COM(2012) 278 final.

## Political decisions concerning fish stocks should always be based on sound scientific advice

Over the last 30 years the EU has sought to regulate its fishing activity. EU fisheries management policy dictates that it is the fisheries ministers in Member States that determine how much fish can be fished from over 200 European fish stocks. This results in fisheries ministers coming together year after year to negotiate the total allowable catch (TACs) of these stocks or the amount of fishing effort that can be applied.

These decisions should always be based on sound scientific advice to ensure sustainability of fish stocks, as advised by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the scientific advisory body to the EU on such matters.<sup>3</sup> So if science is being taken into account, why then are so many European fish stocks in such a poor state?

On one hand, it is because fisheries ministers are concerned about more than just healthy fish stocks. They are also concerned, understandably, about the economic health of their fishing sector, the development of their coastal communities and maintaining strong local economies in those areas and of course their own political careers.

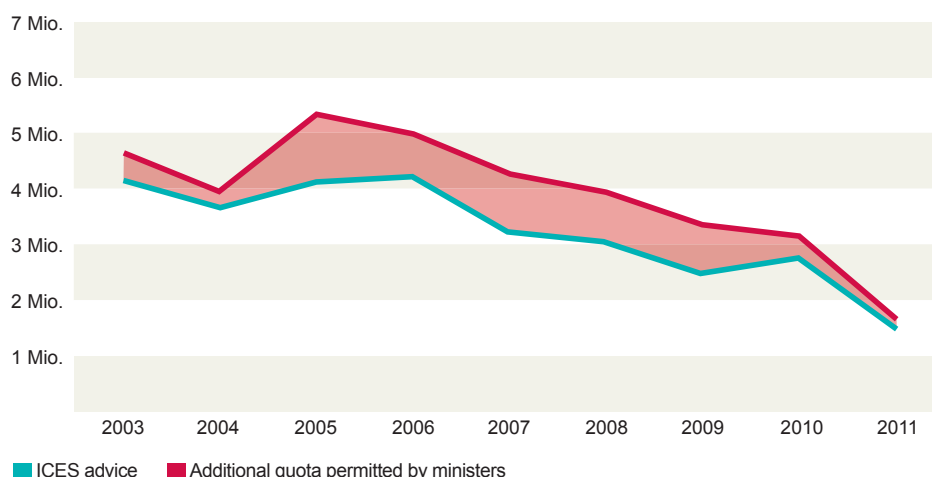
On the other hand ministers to date have not based their decisions on science, but systematically overshoot scientific advice and agreed higher TACs than recommended. In short, governments have legalised overfishing for short term political or economic gain at the cost of long term sustainability. In doing so they have laid the foundations for the poor state of EU fish stocks.

## WWF findings – a pattern of legalised overfishing

WWF has evaluated data for 107 fish stocks in the northeast Atlantic between 2003 and 2011. The data used from a data source of 200 stocks, was supplied by the European Commission, over a continuous 9 year timeline<sup>4</sup> and paints a worrying picture of legalised overfishing by EU governments.

### Total catch in the northeast Atlantic between 2003 and 2011 (in tons)

**Fig. 2:** Total TACs for 107 stocks in the northeast Atlantic between 2003 and 2011. Fisheries ministers' decision curve clearly remains persistently above the scientific proposal.



3) [http://www.ices.dk/advice/request/2012/EC/MoU/20120316\\_MoU\\_Signed.pdf](http://www.ices.dk/advice/request/2012/EC/MoU/20120316_MoU_Signed.pdf)

4) The data evaluated for this report was supplied by the European Commission. It covers 107 stocks in the northeast Atlantic and neighbouring seas. While the total number of EU fish stocks often changes for various reasons, this list remains the same over the entire period from 2003 to 2011. The evaluation did not consider whether stocks/fisheries were managed under one of the new long-term plans. This report regards each violation of a scientific TAC proposal as a non-sustainable decision which could also lead to failure of the plan; refer to the replenishment plan for North Sea cod.

### 1. Politicians continue to approve legalised overfishing

- For the past 9 years, fisheries ministers have approved fishing of 6.2 million extra tons of fish, in addition to the scientifically proposed catch levels (Fig. 1) – **this is legalised overfishing.**

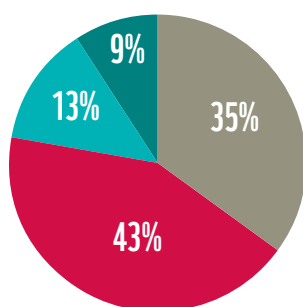
### 2. Fishing quotas set higher than scientific advice

- Political decisions made by the ministers concerning fishing quotas have been on average **45% higher** than the scientific proposals by ICES (Fig. 2). Although the figures have come down in recent years, this average still remains too high.
- To add to the problem of not following scientific advice, the setting of quotas does not include the quantity of fish that is thrown overboard and wasted and not registered as catch i.e. between 2003 and 2005 fishing of North Sea cod alone resulted in 18,000 tons of fish being discarded.
- One example of an extraordinary deviation from scientific advice was an incredible 264% for Sole in 2008 in ICES area VII/7).

### 3. Majority of decision-making not following science

- Fisheries ministers have only followed scientific advice in 13% of their decisions. (Fig. 3).
- For example scientific advice was exceeded in more than half of the decisions regarding Germany's commercially most important fish stocks (Fig. 4). It is only in recent years that an improvement has been seen here that is also linked to the introduction of multi-annual plans (MAPs).

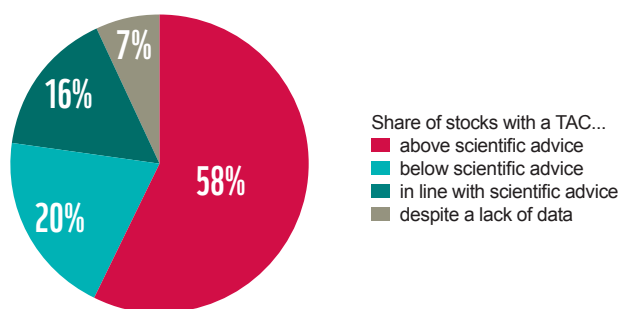
TAC decisions (EU)



**Fig. 3:** The politically defined TACs exceed the scientific proposal in the case of 43 percent of the 107 stocks examined. 35 percent of stocks are data-deficient. The scientific advice was observed in a mere 13 percent of decisions made between 2003 and 2011 and the TAC decided on in 9% of cases was below the scientific proposal.

### Decisions regarding the TACs for Germany's commercially most important fish stocks

**Fig. 4:** Analysis of TAC decisions between 2003 and 2011 for Germany's commercially most important fish stocks: Cod North Sea/ Western and Eastern Baltic Sea, Plaice, Sole North Sea, Herring English Channel/Western Baltic Sea, Blue Whiting, Horse Mackerel, Pollock North Sea/ Norwegian Sea/ Skagerrak/Kattegat.

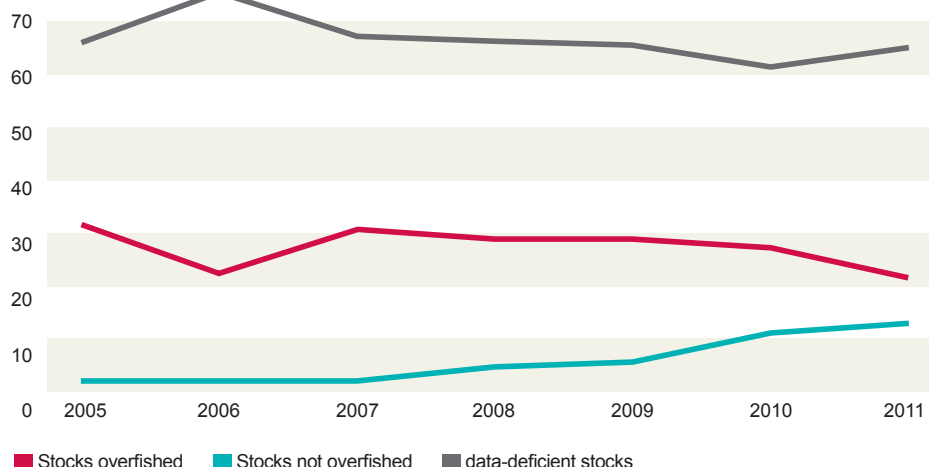


### 4. Lack of data does not equal good status

- The number of stocks classified as overfished drops significantly when a lack of data is particularly high (Fig. 5) – however this simply means that there may be many more overfished stocks amongst stocks for which there is a lack of data. Data-deficiency does not prove good status.

## Evaluation of 107 northeast Atlantic stocks according to the MSY approach (in %)

**Fig. 5:** Between 2005 and 2006 (a year with very little data), we see a sudden increase in data-deficient stocks and a sharp decline in the share of overfished stocks – approximately to the same extent. There is no sign of a parallel increase in non-overfished stocks. This means that many stocks where information is lacking could in fact also be overfished.



## Conclusions and key asks

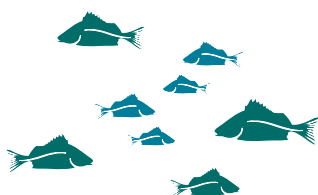
The CFP is currently in the process of reform. The most important question is: will the new EU fisheries policy guarantee stock recovery? Back in 2002 the EU signed up to the concept of maximum sustainable yield (MSY), to be reached by 2015. Therefore it is essential that fisheries ministers adhere to the scientific advice when determining TACs and that better data is gathered for those stocks where it is lacking.

Between 2003 and 2012, the European Union paid around €7.5 million to ICES<sup>5</sup> for a scientific service which the fisheries ministers are simply not taking into account when making their decisions. Something needs to change urgently and clearly. Ministers need to stop wasting citizen's money by disregarding scientific advice.

Post CFP reform, ministers will continue to have the final word in determining TACs and therefore, it is essential that their leeway be limited. This is already witnessed in the long-term management plans already in force for EU fisheries; they define the maximum deviation permitted for TACs compared to the previous year. Fishing quotas also need to be set on the basis of total removals rather than total landings as currently practiced.

However if these plans are to be successful in the long-term, they will have to be strictly based on scientific advice and rigorously implemented. One successful example is the management plans for eastern Baltic cod, which has been healthily recovering in numbers since 2008.

Positive trends in fish stocks recovering have been seen in recent years. However all too often they are an exception rather than the rule. This situation needs to be reversed and delivered through a solid framework within the new Common Fisheries Policy. **Fish stocks will only be able to recover when the right political decisions are made.**



**Fish stocks will only recover when the right political decisions are made**

5) Information from ICES Financial Committee by e-mail on 28 September 2012

The latest analyses indicate that with the right kind of reform and through sustainable fishing, Europe's fishermen could land an additional 2.8 million tons of fish in 2022 and raise their annual revenues by €2.1 billion<sup>6</sup>.

**The new EU fisheries policy must have a sustainable management goal of BMSY by 2015 to deliver fish stock recovery and maintenance. It needs to ensure multi-annual plans are the framework put in place to deliver these goals.**



**Now it is time for  
MEPs to act!**

WWF is asking MEPs and all stakeholders in member states, to support ambitious reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) that:

- **Enables recovery of oceans and fish stocks** to ensure fish populations are above levels which can support maximum sustainable yield (BMSY) by 2015
- **Improves management by involving all stakeholders** such as fishermen, scientists and conservationists in the management of fisheries via mandatory multi-annual plans (MAPs) by 2015 and fishery-based co-management groups
- **Facilitates regional solutions** by enhancing co-operation at regional level on the sustainable management of fisheries
- **Stops the wasteful practice of discarding** while bringing unwanted catches close to zero by 2018, at the latest
- **Limits subsidy payments** to sustainable fishing practices

6) P. Salz 2012. Socio-economic benefits of a bold EU fisheries reform – a discussion paper. Framian BV

## VOTE NOW

- ✓ **for a strong new fisheries policy**
- ✗ **against quota haggling and unsustainable fisheries.**

**STOP BANKRUPTING  
OUR OCEANS** 



#### Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

[www.wwf.eu/fisheries](http://www.wwf.eu/fisheries)

#### For more information:

[www.wwf.eu/fisheries](http://www.wwf.eu/fisheries)

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