

Annex 2 - Discards

Reducing the impact of discarding is an important aim for our industry and there is an urgent need to implement measures to reduce the level of discards wherever possible.

Reducing the impact of discarding endorses the objective of minimising waste of the fishery resource, and reducing impact upon vulnerable fish stocks, but wishes also to achieve an economically viable fishing industry, based on fisheries that are sustainable.

Furthermore discarding presents an issue to fishery scientists in accurately determining levels of fishing mortality and therefore has the potential to distort scientific stock assessments.

1. What discards are?

Discards are those parts of the catch that are returned to the sea. Discarding does not affect all fisheries. The level of discarding varies widely between fisheries, and within fisheries. Assessing how much of a problem discarding poses, and to whom, can be complex.

The impact on the eco-system varies according to the type of discards; therefore different measures need to be taken in order to remedy the situation.

Discarding is less harmful for species that survive when returned to the sea while discarding many small dead fish of commercial species clearly removes any prospect of catching them later when they would have grown bigger, and had a chance to breed.

2. Why discards happen?

There are many different reasons for discarding but two major reasons are *market conditions* and *management regulations*. Both these sets of conditions can change by season or by fishing area, even within one fishery.

2.1. Market conditions

2.1.1. The capture of unwanted species

One of the causes of discarding is the capture of unwanted species. Fish for which there is no market. This type of discards includes species that are completely inedible but also species which are edible but which the public do not favour as food.

Market conditions may also result in fish being discarded because they have no economic value; they are of a marketable species but of low value or not worth keeping; or the fish are mechanically damaged and are of such reduced value that they are not worth keeping.

2.1.2 Discarding for economic reasons

Fish may also be discarded to optimise economic returns to the fisher. This discarding of lower value commercial catch to maximise the value of quota is referred to as 'high grading'.

High grading is a practise of harvesting fish where only the best quality fish are brought ashore and landed. High grading allows fishers to improve quality and gain higher prices for the catch.

2.2 Management regulations

2.2.1 Capture of small fish

In general, small fish command lower prices as well as having higher handling costs. In addition legislation often sets Minimum Landing Sizes for many commercially exploited species in order to discourage targeting of immature fish for stock conservation reasons.

Regulations restrict the retention of fish that are a commercial species but below the legal minimum landing size; restricted by quota so that there is no entitlement to land them; or non marketable because of catch composition.

Poor selection of regulatory minimum mesh sizes may also promote discarding. The mesh sizes are set to avoid catches of fish below minimum landing size. However the highly mixed nature of fisheries in many waters makes it impossible to get this right for all species.

2.2.2 Discarding forced by regulation

One of the principal causes of discarding is the disposal of fish that cannot be landed because of regulations. Fishers are required to discard any marketable fish that they catch for which they do not have quota. This kind of discarding is especially prevalent in mixed fisheries where the quota may be exhausted for one species but the vessel continues to fish for other species for which quota is still available.

Discarding through a lack of quota is a particular problem where there is a mismatch between quota set, the number of vessels fishing and the actual abundance of fish on the fishing grounds.

3. What to do?

We recognise that tackling the problem of discards is not straightforward and that there is no single solution. It will require a complex combination of regulatory reform, technical conservation measures and changed market conditions. Through our industries we are engaged with scientists, fishery managers and fishermen in joint initiatives to better understand and reduce discarding.

Many initiatives have been taken by fishers to reduce discarding. The lesson to be learned from them is that fishers can reduce discards in a way specific to the particular fisheries. However, the economic incentives in the industry must be aligned with the management objective of reducing discards. We are playing our part in looking at ways to market the fish.

We see the development of fishery by fishery long term management plans as the most appropriate vehicle for implementing reduction of discards. These are plans to maintain fish stocks on a long term basis at levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yields.