



Catch Quota Trial 2012: Non-technical summary

Background

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has continued trials of a new fisheries management system that minimises discards with fishing industry participants in the North Sea and South West during 2012. Catch quota management is based on the principle that fishermen should be accountable for the fish they catch rather than just those that they choose to keep and sell.

The current EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is not fit for purpose. Although many species of fish are subject to quota limits, fishermen can continue to fish provided that they do not bring in any species for which their quota has run out. This can mean that large quantities of some species are discarded and thrown overboard while the fleet continues to keep and sell other species for which quota is available.

There are also a number of other reasons why fish are sometimes thrown back at sea, sometimes conservation rules themselves force fishermen to discard or it may be the fisherman's decision not to keep certain fish because they do not realise sufficient profit.

The CFP is undergoing a major reform during 2013. Members of the European Parliament and Council of Ministers are working with the European Commission to agree a new policy. There is broad agreement that the new policy will bring a stop to wasteful discarding of fish. Fishermen will be more accountable for the fish they catch and therefore fish selectively and avoid unwanted catches as far as possible. The new CFP should lead to greater sustainability in harvesting fish stocks by reducing overall catches but increasing the amount that is available for human consumption.

Fishermen participating in MMO trials during 2011 and 2012 have agreed not to throw away any of their catch for key species under trial such as cod, sole, anglerfish and megrim. Provided they stick to this agreement some extra quota is made available to them and those operating in the North Sea are less restricted in the number of days they can spend fishing. Some are also provided with a degree of flexibility from rigid technical rules. Even fish below the minimum legal size must be landed (but not sold) and counts against their quota.

Under these conditions it is then up to fishermen to decide how they will go about avoiding unwanted catches either by moving area or using bigger meshes in their nets. Critically, if participating fishermen were to run out of quota for these species they would have to stop fishing, again providing a strong incentive to avoid wasting quota on unwanted catches which might otherwise just be discarded.

Through these trials the MMO is gaining a better understanding of how a ban on discarding fish can be implemented in practice and how the rules will need to change to allow for this. Findings are also being used by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to inform work on the new CFP.

How the MMO monitors the trial

Greater accountability for the amount of fish that is being caught provides more confidence for fisheries scientists and managers. It also allows fishermen to be able to demonstrate good fishing practice. So it is important to have appropriate monitoring systems in place to support this confidence.

There are a number of ways in which fisheries can be monitored. Many fisheries around the world use observers on board fishing vessels to check that catches are correctly recorded and that rules are complied with. The MMO has been trialling an innovative electronic monitoring system (EM) instead of observers. The EM system records the activity of the vessel through a system of sensors on fishing machinery and CCTV cameras which record footage of fish catching and processing. The data and imagery is then reviewed onshore by the MMO. The system can also be used to verify the catch records provided by the fishermen.

Twelve fishing vessels in the North Sea trawl and net fisheries and 7 vessels in the South West beam trawl fishery took part in the trial. The invitation to take part was extended to other fisheries in which there are known to be high levels of discards. This did attract some interest but applicants felt that the additional quota which is capped by EU rules was insufficient.

The results

The results show that the system was an effective tool for monitoring catches and that some discards for the key species did occur, but at very low levels. Essentially this demonstrates that fishermen have stuck to the agreement.

The trial has recorded a total catch of 1,180 tonnes of catch quota species. A total discard rate was estimated at 0.3% of the total catch, just over 3 tonnes for the year. The results by species are shown in the table below:

Stock	Discards as a percentage of total catch 2011	Discards as percentage of total catch 2012
North Sea cod	0.1%	0.1%
North Sea plaice	-	0.0%
VIIe sole	0.2%	0.1%
VIIde plaice	0.2%	0.6%
VII anglerfish	1.0%	0.7%
VII megrim	-	0.6%
Western hake (a)	-	1.9%

(a) Discards observed from a very low catch (weight) levels

There was also a further 9.6 tonnes or 1% of total landings of fish that were not sold either because they were of poor quality or they were below the legal size limit. So overall 99% of the total catch of species under trial was landed and marketed.

The results also show that in some fisheries it is difficult to avoid unwanted catches completely, for example in the North Sea fishery for plaice and lemon sole it is not always possible to avoid some catches of juvenile cod. In the South West it is apparent that implementing a discard ban becomes more challenging when these vessels are operating inshore.

The ability to estimate catches by species and weight or size distribution from CCTV footage was further developed as part of the 2012 trials. The accuracy of estimates made from footage was tested against actual weights and length measurements collected by observers. The results showed encouraging levels of accuracy and also demonstrated the potential to collect fish length data which could also be used by fisheries scientists.