

## **[Comment] EU fishing policy faces up to federal reality**

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Today @ 06:58 CET

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The problems of the European fishing industry are well-known. There are too many boats chasing too few fish.

The ability of the fishing fleets to catch fish has been outstripping the ability of the marine environment to regenerate itself. Every other industry has used technology to boost its productivity, and fishing is no different. This hasn't just led to job losses as a result, but also increased pressure on fish numbers, with some 88 per cent of European fish stocks now reported to be threatened. A new approach is urgently needed.

But a European fishing policy has got to be able to balance out several different objectives: to maintain employment in the fishing industry; to preserve fish stocks for the future; and to embrace technology as a means of cutting costs and reducing prices for consumers. A complex mix of regulatory tools will be needed.

One option that is sometimes proposed is simply to walk away. Break up the European fishing policy, and recreate national fishing policies. The proponents of this approach hope to protect jobs in their own national fishing industries at the expense of jobs in other countries. The flaw in this approach is that it won't protect fish stocks.



"Environmental and political logic rule out returning to national fishing policies" (Photo: EUobserver.com)

The fish themselves are not constrained by national borders and swim from one part of the sea to another. Only a common regulatory approach can prevent over-fishing in each set of national waters. If the need is to cut fishing capacity overall,

which national policy is going to opt for sufficient cuts when it has been adopted precisely in order to avoid them? Both environmental and political logic rule out this option.

The European Commission is, by contrast, proposing a more European approach, with more federalism, not less.

Specifically, there is the idea to move away from a system of national quotas, which are currently distributed among national fleets, and awarded quotas directly to individuals, regardless of nationality. This creates a direct relationship between the EU and the citizen, rather than having that relationship intermediated by national governments. This is the essence of federalism. (In the jargon, fishing quota would become a "federal instrument".)

It always used to be said that a European fishing policy was necessary because the fish can freely cross from one country's territorial waters to another. One might go further and say that a federal European fishing policy is needed because the harm done to the marine environment does not depend on the nationality of the crew that does the fishing.

In addition to a better approach to distributing quota, though, there must also be a better way of taking decisions about quota size. This is the other half of what federalism means: it is not only the competences of the EU but also its decision-making methods. Specifically, there needs to be a properly democratic system of striking a balance between the ecological and the economic objectives, namely deciding the size of the permitted catch from one year to the next.

Furthermore, access to the European Court of Justice needs to be opened up to all those affected by decisions about fishing. The environment group WWF has tried and failed to bring a case in the past, but it should have just as much right to do so as any member state government.

The whole point about a federal Europe is that it values the rights and the role of the citizens as well as those of the states. In fishing, as in so many other areas, this is the best way to make policy in the best interest of Europe and of Europeans.

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