

Seafish position on North East Atlantic Mackerel

Background

There is presently an ongoing dispute regarding the fishing of mackerel in the Northeast Atlantic. The crisis erupted in 2010 after the Faroes and Iceland both said they planned to independently increase their mackerel catches - to nearly 300,000 tonnes in total. The two countries assert that mackerel are now feeding in greater numbers in their own waters during the summer months and therefore that they should have the rights to larger catches.

The Faroese and Icelandic decision pushed the total quantity of mackerel being fished across the Northeast Atlantic (including agreed EU catches) to 959 thousand tonnes in 2011, 38% greater than the upper limit recommended by the scientific assessment body the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES).

For the past two years the total mackerel catch has therefore been in excess of the internationally agreed management regime. As a result, in April 2012 the Marine Stewardship Council suspended sustainability certification (MSC) status for seven individual mackerel fisheries in the UK and Scandinavia.

Mackerel is one of the most valuable stocks to the Scottish fishing industry, representing about one third of the value of total landings by the Scottish fleet. There have been strong protests by Scottish fishermen at the continuing situation – including blockades at Scottish ports to prevent Icelandic and Faroese vessels from landing mackerel. The EU has sought to offer a bigger share of the total catch with Iceland and the Faroes but recently expressed disappointment at the lack of engagement by both countries in discussions intended to resolve the issue.

Fisheries Commissioner Maria Damanaki has now stated her intention to implement trade sanctions against Iceland and the Faroes, starting in 2013. These sanctions are likely to exclude the import and sale of Icelandic and Faroese mackerel products to the EU.

Seafish's position

Seafish believes that responsible practice by fishermen is fundamental to the sustainability of all fisheries and that fisheries management regimes are only effective if based on sound scientific advice. Fish do not respect geographical boundaries so it is also imperative that fishing nations co-operate to jointly implement effective management regimes. Only in this way can we preserve both fisheries and the marine environment for the long term.

The independent increase in catches by Iceland and the Faeroes is clearly at odds both with the goals of long term sustainable practice and co-operation. We therefore endorse the efforts of the EU, Norway, Iceland and Faeroes to re-establish an international agreement (a Coastal States' agreement) managed under the North East Atlantic Fisheries Convention to which all these states are signatories. Hence, re-engage all mackerel fishermen (regardless of nationality) in a co-operative effort to manage the stock effectively for the future benefit of all.