

# Scientists alarm over Atlantic fish stocks could hurt supply

By Ahmed ElAmin

19/10/2005 - **A call by an EU scientific body for cutbacks on allowable fish catches or for a complete halt for some key species in the northeast Atlantic could eventually pose a serious supply problem for food processors if the recommendations are adopted.**

This Friday, scientists from the influential International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) will release a report calling for a complete overhaul of deep-sea fisheries, calling for drastic measures to be taken until a full assessment on the world seafood situation is completed.

The ICES annual assessment is used by the European Commission in recommending levels in the annual quota negotiations.

Environmental awareness in the food industry has become increasingly important in recent years, as a result of consumer pressure and increasing regulation. Even if many governments will be reluctant to take some of the drastic measures proposed by the ICES, the report will add fuel to consumer lobbying actions by environmentalists calling for a halt to overfishing.

In turn, consumers power has been putting some pressure on supermarkets and food processors to be [environmentally friendly](#). Some have even put environmental statements on their products. For example, [Delhaize](#) in Belgium has built its marketing around appealing to the consumers who want environmentally friendly products.

The big winners in any such debate will be those who use seafood from [fish](#) farms.

The ICES is recommending that all existing deep-sea fisheries should be cutback to low levels until they can demonstrate that they are sustainable, the organisation said in a press statement.

They will advise a complete halt to depleted deep-sea sharks, and they will recommend that no new fisheries for deep-sea fish should be allowed until it can be demonstrated that they are capable of being sustainable.

The report will also advise a halt to catches of spurdog, basking shark, porbeagle, common skate and thornback ray. They want a halt to cod fishing in the North Sea, the Irish Sea and west of Scotland.

They want the fishing of hake to be stopped in the Iberian peninsula. A complete halt to fishing for sandeel in the North Sea and pout in Norway.

*"New fisheries on deep-sea fish should be permitted only when they are accompanied by programmes to collect data and should expand very slowly until it can be demonstrated that they, too, can be sustainable,"* the ICES stated.

On the positive side, the ICES scientists say that haddock and blue whiting, a member of the cod family, are plentiful. The data relating to monkfish is so poor that it is "impossible" to produce accurate advice on the status of the stock, they stated.

They estimate stock of 266,000 tons in 2005 as a result of the large fish spawn in 1999. Scientists, however, warn that since the 1999 year class, subsequent year classes have been below average so unless there is another big year class it is likely that catch levels will decline in future.

The blue whiting stock - a member of the cod family - is also plentiful at the moment, because of some successful year classes. The stock reached a record high of over five million tons in 2003, but has since declined slightly.

However, the ICES will advise that current fishing pressure is too high and needs to be reduced in line with the long-term management plan agreed for this stock by the EU, Faroe Islands, Iceland and Norway in 2002.

ICES will also advise that measures set out in the management plan to protect juveniles should be implemented, that the stock should be monitored more closely and that there should be an immediate reduction of fishing if the number of young fish joining the stock drops in the coming years.

The Norwegian spring spawning herring which continues to thrive, with the stock now estimated at about six million tons. Fishing pressure has been creeping up in the last few years and needs to be reduced in line with the agreed long-term management plan, the ICES stated.

Meanwhile cod stocks in the North Sea, Irish Sea and west of Scotland remain well below minimum recommended levels and the advice for these stocks, and Iberian Peninsula hake, which is also still in poor condition, is zero catch.

Whiting in the Irish Sea are also thought to be in poor condition so the advice is for the lowest possible catch until the stock has had a chance to recover. ICES will also advise that North Sea plaice and sole need further reductions in catch, or effort, to let the plaice spawning stock increase and to prevent the sole spawning stock from declining in the near future.

Fisheries for anglerfish are increasingly profitable across the ICES area but scientists have such poor data about the number of fish that are caught that it is impossible to produce accurate advice on the status of the stock, the organisations stated.

*"We, and by this I mean managers, fishers and scientists, are all stuck in a vicious circle of bad data resulting in inaccurate advice and then poor management,"* said Poul Degnbol, chair of the ICES advisory committee on fishery management. *"To try and change this we are recommending that the management of fisheries for anglerfish changes from being based on total allowable catches to being based on effort restrictions - limiting the amount of time that fishers have to catch anglerfish."*

Although effort controls won't solve all the problems they should help to reduce the incentive for misreporting and discarding, which could mean that scientists will have better data on which to base their advice.

*"We are also calling for much more stringent monitoring so that we can get a better idea of what is going on in these fisheries,"* he said.

Since the 1980s, dwindling resources on the continental shelves of the North Atlantic have encouraged the development of fisheries in deeper waters - greater than about 400m.

There has been a tendency for fisheries for species such as anglerfish and Greenland halibut to extend into deeper waters, and new fisheries have developed to target the "new" deepwater species that have been found there, the ICES said.

Deepwater species such as the argentine or greater silver smelt (*Argentina silus*) and roundnose grenadier (*Coryphaenoides rupestris*), which were previously bycatch species have been targeted within the ICES area for the last two decades.

Orange roughy (*Hoplostethus atlanticus*) has been a target species since the early 1990s. Deepwater sharks such as the leafscale gulper shark and Portuguese dogfish have been targeted since the 1980s.

*"The life history of deepwater creatures is very diverse, but many species of fish targeted by fisheries, and their communities, are particularly vulnerable to disturbance because they grow slowly, mature late in life, and form aggregations easily accessible to fisheries," the ICES stated. "Recovery rates are much slower than in shallower waters. Examples of vulnerable species include the long-lived fish species orange roughy and grenadiers, but also animals such as cold-water corals that live on the seabed at these great depths and form important habitats for many fishes."*

The ICES' advisory committee on fishery management (ACFM) provides scientific information and advice on living resources and their harvesting. The ACFM consists of one scientist from each of the 19 ICES member countries along with chairs of relevant ICES science committees and observers from the European Commission, Faroe Islands/Greenland and the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO).

Earlier this year Greenpeace launched an attack on retailers who it claims *"do next to nothing to ensure that their fish is sourced from sustainable sources"*. The group has called on supermarkets to face up to their responsibilities and ensure their seafood products are sourced from environmentally friendly sources.

*"Globally, three quarters of commercial fish stocks have been fully exploited and nearly 90 per cent of stocks of large predatory fish are already gone,"* the group claims.

The full report on fish stocks in the northeast Atlantic will be available on the ICES website on 21 October 2005 at <http://www.ices.dk/advice/icesadvice.asp>.