

EU/Iceland

No agreement on mackerel quotas

By Anne Eckstein | Friday 17 February 2012

The final round of negotiations between the EU, Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands (the 'coastal states') on quotas for mackerel fisheries has been concluded without any agreement being reached - with each party accusing the other of lacking goodwill and flexibility. Following the inconclusive meeting, which took place in Reykjavik on 14-16 February, the four parties agreed that they would determine their own quotas for 2012 and come together again in the autumn of this year to try to determine quotas for 2013.

In a joint declaration, Fisheries Commissioner Maria Damanaki and Norwegian Fisheries Minister Lisbeth Berg-Hansen described the outcome of the meeting as "disappointing" and "of grave concern to the sustainability of the mackerel stock," adding that "the unilateral actions of Iceland and the Faroe Islands are putting the viability of the stock at risk".

Despite five rounds of negotiations in 2011 and 2012, during which the EU and Norway presented three sets of proposals, "it is particularly disappointing that neither Iceland or the Faroe Islands really engaged in the negotiation process, and that neither Iceland nor the Faroe Islands have made proposals, which would have respected the zonal attachment principles and historical fishing, on which stock arrangements have been negotiated by those same parties in the past," the joint statement reads. The EU and Norway have offered Iceland and the Faroe Islands a considerably increased share of the mackerel stock, and would also have allowed Icelandic and Faroese vessels to fish a significant part of their quota share in EU and Norwegian waters, where the value of the fish is substantially higher than in Icelandic or Faroese waters.

The EU and Norway recognise the fact that the mackerel stock has migrated towards Iceland: this species was absent from Icelandic waters until 2006, and therefore the country was not considered one of the coastal states. As a relative newcomer to the fishery, Iceland is being urged to respect the dependency of coastal communities in Norway and the EU on mackerel fishing. However, the case of the Faroe Islands is different: this country was part of an agreement concluded between the EU, Norway and the Faroe Islands in 2009 for a period of ten years - although it left in 2011.

A press release from the Icelandic Fisheries Ministry also underlines the failure of this week's meeting to reach a satisfying agreement. Tomas H. Heidar, negotiating on behalf of Iceland, said: "When it became clear that no agreement would be reached on the allocation of quotas between the parties, Iceland proposed that all the parties would reduce their catches in the same proportion this year. This proposal was not accepted by the other parties". Therefore, parties will unilaterally establish their mackerel quotas in 2012 as has been the case in previous years. Iceland says its share has been limited to 16-17% of the total catches and accordingly the catch limit this year is expected to be around 145,000 tonnes.

Battle of semantics

The failed negotiations are another example of a breakdown in communications, and a battle of semantics. The Commission emphasised that Iceland has moved from zero catch in 2006 to 156,802 tonnes caught within its fishing zone in 2011, and that Faroese catches have multiplied sixfold to 150,000 tonnes in 2011. If the EU and Norway had followed the same logic used by the Faroe Islands and Iceland to justify their catch quotas, then fishing would go "totally out of control," said the Commission's statement.

A Commission source said that in fact the debate is based on two conflicting elements: the figure of 17% is correct when referring to a proportion of the stock, but the declared quota (145,000 tonnes) is in fact equivalent to 22,7% of the total allowable catch (TAC). It can therefore be surmised that by not respecting the rules of the Paris Treaty, which are based on "a historical reference level," for one more year Reykjavik is attempting to establish de facto a higher reference level that would give the country a stronger position for future negotiations.