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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

*SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT*

*on the proposal establishing a long-term plan for the northern stock of hake and the fisheries  
exploiting that stock*

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### *SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT*

*on the proposal establishing a long-term plan for the northern stock of hake and the fisheries exploiting that stock*

The Impact Assessment concerns a draft proposal for a Regulation that would replace the current recovery plan and set long-term management objectives and implementing methods concerning a fishery for the northern hake.

The scope of the proposal covers the stock of northern hake distributed mainly to the west and south of Ireland, in the western Channel and in the Bay of Biscay and the fisheries exploiting that stock.

In 2004, a recovery plan for the northern hake stock (EC Reg. No 811/2004) followed up a previous emergency plan (EC Reg. No 1162/2001, EC Reg. No 2602/2001 and EC Reg. No 494/2002). The recovery plan aimed at achieving a stock spawning biomass (SSB) of 140,000t (precautionary biomass level  $B_{pa}$ ), by limiting the proportion of hake removed from the stock by fishing (fishing mortality,  $F$ ) to 0.25, and with a maximum change in TAC between consecutive years of 15%. The objective of a recovery plan was to achieve an increase in the quantities of hake stock threatened with collapse to a minimum safe level according to the precautionary approach.

According to the current Regulation, the recovery plan should be replaced by a management plan when, in two consecutive years, the target size level for the stock has been reached. ICES, with the agreement of STECF, should advise when the targets set in the recovery plan have been reached.

Recent scientific assessments by ICES and STECF indicate that the objective of the recovery plan has been achieved. The recovery plan should therefore be replaced by a management plan to ensure high yields and sustainable exploitation of the stock.

This report assesses the options available to the Community to provide effective management for the stock of northern hake. It analyses the following options:

#### *Option 1: no policy change*

Retaining the management based on the fishing mortality as set in the current recovery plan has been considered. The option implies continuing to fish at the precautionary level of fishing mortality ( $F_{pa}$ ) of 0.25.

This option was assessed as having a negative impact on the northern hake by retaining fishing at the rate which is too high for the stock and produces high discarding rates, particularly of juvenile hake. It also implies abandonment of responsibilities falling upon the EU under the Common Fisheries Policy to limit fishing to sustainable levels in order to restore and maintain stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield, which in turn would benefit both the fishery and industry.

#### *Option 2: management plan*

This option is based on the approach based on maximum sustainable yield (MSY). It provides for gradual adjustments in fishing mortality to let the stock rebuild towards MSY levels. Several scenario alternatives of the plan have been tested.

This option was assessed as having low negative economic and social impacts on the northern hake fleet in the short-term but benefiting the sector in the long-term. It was also assessed that this option would demonstrate a strong commitment by the EU to ensure sustainable fisheries resources. The option, however, would take too long to bring the necessary adjustments in the fleet capacity and improving its economic efficiency.

#### *Option 3: decommissioning of fleet*

This option is also based on MSY approach but the recommended fishing mortality levels would be achieved in a shorter time. The option implies reducing fishing mortality and addressing overcapacity of fleet through voluntary decommissioning.

This option was assessed as showing EU's commitment to achieving a balance between fishing and the productive capacity of the stock. The option would also bring the necessary short-term reduction to hake fishing mortality while allowing for a development of a smaller but more efficient and more profitable fishing sector. As a result, the system is geared to mitigate the economic impact that the fisheries sector may experience during the initial phase of the transition and ensure the sustainable fisheries resources.

#### *Conclusion*

The report concludes that Option 3 should be the chosen action. Adjusting fishing mortality to MSY levels through a short-term voluntary decommissioning of fleet, followed by fishing at a stable rate thereafter would best address the problem faced by the northern hake fishery.

In the past the Commission tended to centre on providing for gradual adjustments in fishing mortality through long-term management plans to avoid social disruptions. Given a current situation, where operational costs in the industry have significantly increased leading to increased pressure to adopt the fleet capacity, the stakeholders request opportunities to allow for accelerated adaptations of the EU fleet. Decommissioning of fleet is therefore the option supported by DG MARE and stakeholders, who have been extensively consulted during the development of this policy.