



SEAS AT RISK

SEAS AT RISK OPENING STATEMENT TO THE 24TH ANNUAL MEETING OF NEAFC, 14 NOVEMBER 2005

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates and Observers,

Seas At Risk very much appreciates the opportunity to once again observe the Annual Meeting of the Commission.

For Seas At Risk the ecosystem approach to fisheries management and the integration of fisheries and environmental policies are key in our work related to fisheries and marine conservation. We therefore welcome the proposal of the Working Group on the Future of NEAFC for amendments of the Convention. We believe that the inclusion of the objective to ensure long-term conservation, as well as the references to the precautionary approach, minimisation of harmful impacts on ecosystems, and the need to conserve marine biological diversity, are necessary improvements of the Convention. These amendments will broaden the scope of the Convention and will enable NEAFC to work and take decisions in line with important relevant Agreements such as the UN Fish Stocks Agreement. We therefore hope that this meeting will adopt the proposed amendments.

Furthermore, Seas At Risk proposes the consideration by this meeting or by the Working Group on the Future of NEAFC of enhancing transparency of NEAFC, by allowing observers access to meeting documents prior of the meetings and to the various Working Groups as envisaged in article 12 of the Fish Stocks Agreement.

We would also like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to far-reaching implications of the recent ICES advice on deep-sea fisheries and vulnerable habitats, which clearly indicates the need for more stringent measures to be taken by NEAFC in order to ensure long term sustainability. We refer you to the letter that Seas At Risk recently sent to all delegations. With the publication of this year's ACFM report, ICES called for a 'complete overhaul of deep-sea fisheries.' Unfortunately, this advice came too late: the NEAFC Working Group on Deep-sea species had already recommended a continuation of the current management measure of an effort limit of 70%. Given differing reference periods for the establishment of the effort limit - some of which go back to times when some deep-sea fisheries fleets were much larger - this management measure will have minimal positive effect. Indeed, in certain cases effort can even expand! And of course Contracting Parties can still choose not to comply with any agreed effort reduction. The EU for example adopted for this year a 10% effort reduction in deep-sea fisheries compared with 2003, rather than the agreed 30% reduction compared to the period of 1998-2000.

Clearly continuation of the 70% effort limit is not consistent with the ICES advice, in particular the latest advice of a zero catch of two species of deep-water sharks, which are by-caught in all mixed species deep-sea fisheries. It does not reflect the need for a 'complete overhaul'. We therefore call upon this meeting to respond to the call of ICES and adopt an interim suspension of all deep-sea fisheries with shark by-catch, until there are enough data and effective measures for shark by-catch to be sufficiently reduced and deep-sea fisheries to be sustainable.

Seas At Risk would also like to raise concerns about bottom trawling in the NEAFC area. We respectfully draw your attention to the 2004 UN General Assembly Resolution on Sustainable Fisheries, in particular paragraph 66 which calls on States – individually or through their participation in Regional Fisheries Management Organisations – to take urgent action to prohibit bottom trawling on sensitive marine ecosystems. In the negotiations that just ended in NY last week for the 2005 Resolution, States have reaffirmed the importance of this. Next year, a review of measures taken to fulfill this commitment will be undertaken.

Seas at Risk welcomes the decision by NEAFC last year to temporarily close several areas to bottom trawling and fishing with static gear. With this welcome first step, NEAFC is one of the three Regional Fisheries Management Organizations that so far have taken measures to protect vulnerable bottom habitats from fishing. However, there is a problem with this piecemeal approach. The 2005 report of the ICES Working Group on Deepwater Ecology highlights the lack of information available on the distribution of seabed habitats in the NEAFC area, and stresses that decisions to close areas to bottom trawling may inadvertently divert trawling to similarly sensitive habitats that are currently unmapped.

With regard to the two additional closures proposed by Norway and the OSPAR Commission which were not adopted last year, ICES has now advised NEAFC to permanently close four defined areas on the Rockall Bank and has confirmed the presence of sizeable cold water coral reefs on the Hatton Bank. It is possible that the closures NEAFC agreed to last year have caused displacement of effort to, for example, Rockall and Hatton Banks, both of which have turned out to have similarly sensitive habitats. The implications of this are clear.

Given the potential consequences of diverting trawling from closed areas to other vulnerable but unmapped habitats, the application of the precautionary approach would require the closing of all deep-sea areas in the NEAFC Regulatory Area for bottom trawling, except for those areas where it is scientifically established that bottom trawling will not impact vulnerable deep sea habitats. Scientists indicate that for the NEAFC area it should not take too long before there is enough information to enable comprehensive measures to be taken for the protection of vulnerable deep-sea habitats. Until that time, we request the meeting to apply the precautionary approach in this case.

The need to close to bottom trawlers the areas identified by ICES on the Rockall Bank and the Hatton Bank goes without saying. Delaying these closures with another year will cause unnecessary additional damage to the existing coral reefs, which will take more than a lifetime to be repaired, if that will happen at all.

Seas At Risk would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this meeting. We wish this meeting all success it will need to make progress on the implementation of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management including the necessary steps to safeguard deep-sea stocks and vulnerable habitats.