



**PRESS RELEASE: for immediate release, Monday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2005**

## **Nice Words, Shame about the Action: NEAFC fails to protect deepwater fish and corals**

**London, UK. After a week of negotiations, the intergovernmental commission responsible for managing deep-water fishing in the North East Atlantic agreed to include long-term conservation of fish stocks and ecosystems as part of its remit. The Marine Conservation Society and Seas At Risk welcome the new approach, but are highly critical of the outcomes of The North East Atlantic Fisheries Commissions (NEAFC) Annual Meeting, which failed to further reduce fishing effort on vulnerable deep-sea fish stocks and to protect fragile cold-water coral reefs. Most scientists recommend a reduction in deepwater fishing, while some consider that deep-sea areas should not be exploited at all.**

NEAFC is finally shifting towards management of marine ecosystems instead of just fish stocks - in line with its international obligations. But two environmental organisations; Seas at Risk (SAR) and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), believe that NEAFC is not moving quickly or far enough to protect the immensely rich and valuable mix of species and habitats that are found in the deep-sea from the irreparable damage caused by bottom trawling. "Although we welcome NEAFC's agreement to adopt an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, we are concerned that this is just a good will gesture. NEAFC should have made some brave and timely decisions if they were to stand by their commitment towards long-term conservation of fisheries resources" said Dr Bryce Beukers-Stewart, Fisheries Policy Officer with the Marine Conservation Society.

In October this year the scientific advisory committee of the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) called for a “complete overhaul of deepwater fisheries” in North East Atlantic Waters. ICES stated that all their evidence indicates current levels of fishing effort on deep-sea fish stocks are much too high – and advised cutting back fishing considerably. However, NEAFC decided to ignore this unprecedented call for immediate action and to maintain fishing effort at the same level as in 2005 – a situation that ICES clearly indicates is unsustainable.

Deep-sea fish species are characterised by slow growth, extreme longevity and very low levels of reproduction. This makes them highly vulnerable to overfishing – the serial depletion around the world of the deep-sea fish species Orange Roughy is testimony to this. Some scientists even consider that deep-sea fish stocks cannot be fished sustainably at all.

ICES also recommended NEAFC to close a number of large areas on the Hatton and Rockall Banks to towed bottom fishing gear - in order to protect fragile cold-water coral reefs (*Lophelia spp.*). Although these closures were backed to a large extent by proposals from the European Union and Russia, they were blocked by several Contracting Parties in the final stages of the meeting. Again NEAFC have missed a golden opportunity to make a genuine difference to protection of deep-sea habitats – an issue that is grabbing international attention at the moment.

“NEAFC had the chance this year to stand at the forefront of modern fisheries management, put their words into action and apply the precautionary approach they agreed to – but got bogged down in negotiations. They should have agreed to closing all deep-sea areas in the NEAFC area to bottom trawling, except for those areas where it is scientifically established that bottom trawling will not impact vulnerable deep sea habitats. This lack of action will ensure further damage to the precious marine ecosystem of the deep sea, before it is even fully described” said Dr Monica Verbeek, Fisheries Policy Officer with Seas At Risk.

**For further information:**

**Dr Bryce Beukers-Stewart, Marine Conservation Society, Fisheries Policy Officer:**

**Tel: + 44 (0) 1989 566017**

**Dr Monica Verbeek, Seas At Risk, Fisheries Policy Officer:**

**Tel: +351 96 5617846/21 4647255**

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

- Seas At Risk is an independent non-governmental European federation of environmental organisations concerned with the protection and restoration of the marine environment. More information on Seas At Risk and deep-water fisheries can be found on their website: [www.seas-at-risk.org](http://www.seas-at-risk.org)
- The Marine Conservation Society is the UK Charity dedicated to the protection of the marine environment and its wildlife. Since its formation in 1983, MCS has become a recognised authority on marine and coastal conservation and is regularly consulted by Government for its views on a range of marine issues. MCS provides information and guidance on many aspects of marine conservation and produces the annual *Good Beach Guide*, as well as promoting public participation in volunteer projects and surveys such as *Adopt-a-Beach*, *Seasearch* and *Basking Shark Watch*. It has also produced the consumer guide to eating sustainably captured fish *The Good Fish Guide* and the associated website: [www.fishonline.org](http://www.fishonline.org). For more information: [www.mcsuk.org](http://www.mcsuk.org)
- The NEAFC regulates fisheries in the North-East Atlantic Ocean. There are currently seven contracting parties: the European Community, Denmark (on behalf of the Faeroe Islands and Greenland), Estonia, Iceland, Norway, Poland and the Russian Federation. The NEAFC convened for its 24th Annual Meeting 14-18 November at its offices in London (22 Berners Street, + 44 (0) 207 6310016). Seas At Risk and the Marine Conservation Society have been permitted to attend as observers to the Annual Meetings since 2002. Further information can be found on the NEAFC homepage: [www.neafc.org](http://www.neafc.org)
- ICES is an international science organisation studying North Atlantic marine ecosystems and the living resources they sustain. It works with experts from its 19 Member Countries including the Russian Federation and the USA. One of the tasks of ICES is the provision of scientific information on effects of fisheries and advice on fisheries management in the North-East Atlantic in response to requests by, for example, NEAFC and the European Commission. They advise NEAFC every year on status of stocks and quotas. The ICES reports (ACFM 2004/2005) are available on the web: [www.ices.dk](http://www.ices.dk)
- At its Annual Meeting in 2004 NEAFC moved to cut effort levels in deep-sea fisheries by 30%. However, the 30% cut was based on the maximum effort observed since the fisheries commenced. In some cases this allowed for fishing effort to actually increase from that observed in recent years – even though current fishing levels are thought by ICES to be unsustainable.
- The Rockall and Hatton Banks are located on and around the 200 nm limit off the NW of the United Kingdom.
- Last year the United Nations General Assembly called on Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, like NEAFC, to take urgent action to prohibit bottom trawling on sensitive marine ecosystems. Over the last few months the governments of countries such as the UK, Canada and Australia have also received letters from their leading marine scientists calling on them to ban bottom trawling in vulnerable deep-sea areas – and these proposals now have widespread backing around the world.