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Brussels, 18th December 2019**Fisheries Council secures sustainable catch limits for 2020****- For immediate release -**

A two-day long intensive negotiation finished this very morning with the difficult political compromise reached by EU Fisheries ministers on the catch limits for 2020. This agreement reconciles to objective to secure healthy stocks with the need to ensure the socio-economic sustainability of the EU fleet. The latter was acknowledged by the Council which, after a predominantly conservationist proposal from the European Commission, adopted a better-balanced decision in light of the socio-economic data provided by Member States. The industry will however face many challenges for next year due to the extreme quota reductions and restrictive measures adopted for key species such as cod in all EU waters.

The EU has set strict catch limits for fish stocks in the Atlantic, the North Sea, and international fisheries with the aim to achieve high long-term yields for all stocks, referred to as Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). This means that EU vessels will only catch the right amount of fish that would guarantee the regeneration of the stocks.

Europêche welcomes that the quota cut proposed for southern hake was reduced from -20% to -5%, in line with the multiannual plan. Concerning northern hake, despite last year's increase, the Council endorsed the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) reductions of around 20% for all other hake stocks in the rest of Community waters. These stocks show healthy biomass levels, therefore a limited reduction of the fishing pressure would suffice to keep the stocks in good shape, according to scientists.

The EU fishing sector regrets the decrease in North Sea saithe by 15% in spite of the good results yielded last year. The Council also adopted a roll-over for whiting in the North Sea as well as steep quota reductions in other relevant areas such as the Celtic Sea by 43%. Common sole stocks, generally see increased catch limits thanks to the good state of the stock which will benefit fishermen's pockets. Besides, the flatfish situation in the North Sea is extremely favourable with the stocks for both main species, sole and plaice, well within the MSY limits. Therefore, TAC's could be raised by 40% and 17% respectively, which is especially an encouraging sign for the fisheries dependent communities.

Whereas the Council decided last year to reduce the TAC for haddock in the North Sea by 30%, the positive results for these species in international waters resulted this year in a rightful 23% increase. In the Celtic waters for these species, the Council decided to endorse the Commission's proposal to increase the haddock TAC by only 30% despite the 100% advised by ICES. This restrictive approach was preferred to protect the vulnerable cod stock that is caught as a bycatch of haddock.

Much of the focus has been given to cod, one of the main and most difficult decisions that had to be taken. The Council mitigated some of the cuts proposed by the Commission (up to -88%), nevertheless according to Europêche the situation will be dramatic across the Atlantic for the fishing fleets targeting these stocks. Namely for cod in Celtic and Iberian waters, where last year's hefty cut of 48% is furthermore reduced to another 50%. *"This will come as yet another nail in the coffin for many fishermen"*, according to Daniel Voces, Managing Director of Europêche.

In order to account for the difficult situation of cod and whiting stocks, the Council decided to introduce, apart from the previous safeguard measures, remedial measures such as higher mesh sizes to increase selectivity and reduce bycatch. Europêche recalls that concrete, rational and responsible measures for the protection of these stocks were proposed by the sector within the regional context under the recently adopted western water management plan. The industry argues that these were ignored and the Council has strangely adopted new technical measures through an EU law disregarding the efforts made at regional level and returning to unwanted micromanagement against the spirit of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). In particular, the imposition of a new type of trawl from 1 June 2020, will not allow to face the problems without causing heavy losses for the many vessels concerned.

The tables for anglerfish have been turned with a switch in the increase of fishing opportunities in the different areas, namely a strong cut of 30% in the northern Celtic Sea and North Sea, with only small increases in TAC in areas VII (+7%) and VIII (+8%). As for pollack in these areas, the Council decided on a rollover against the Commission's proposed cuts of 10 and 40%.

Regarding megrim stocks, they continue to show steady growth rates in all areas, particularly in the south which sees a TAC increase of 24%. In addition, the sharp quota cuts of horse mackerel up to 41% in northern areas contrasts with the good results in the south. Despite the Commission's plans to reduce catch limits by 50% in Iberian waters the quota was increased by 24% in line with the ICES advice.

The agreement reached with Norway on jointly-managed stocks in the North-East Atlantic either followed the ICES advice or rolled over the same arrangements as last year. Following the scientific revision of the mackerel stock a TAC increase of 41% has been adopted.

Thanks to steady efforts, northern seabass is now at MSY. As a result, the Council has decided to increase the bycatch levels and grant further flexibility in their management.

2019 was just the first year that the landing obligation was applicable to all EU fisheries, and in light of the difficulties faced by EU fishermen, the Council decided to extend an extra year the pool mechanism for quota exchanges between Member States. This measure is welcomed by the sector, as fishing vessels with low or no quota for certain species would have to cease fishing operations even if they still have quota for other species in the same area.

On another note, for the first time ever fishing opportunities were decided for the Western Mediterranean Sea. It was agreed that the fishing effort for demersal species will be reduced by 10% as laid down in the management plan to continue rebuilding fish stocks.

Daniel Voces commented: *"The result achieved this morning is a step forward in the right direction to continue the EU lead in sustainably managing fish stocks. Generally speaking, the political agreement will provide the necessary measures to protect fish stocks and at the same time allow vessels to continue fishing in a sustainable manner. Having said that, the survival of many fishing fleets will be put to a test in light of the huge quota reductions, particularly in the Celtic and North Sea, to comply with the ambitious objectives set in the CFP".* Mr Voces concluded: *"During the last decade many efforts have been made by the EU fishing fleets to rebuild fish stocks to the point that, next year 99.4% of the landings in the EU from the North-East Atlantic will come from healthy stocks. Difficult decisions have been made today to achieve these levels. The industry supports quota reductions, when and where needed, that are consistent with maintaining the fabric of the fishing industry and coastal communities, but not just to sustain a rigid interpretation of fisheries rules".*

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