



Reducing fish discards: recommendations for successful pilot projects

New research has shed light on the factors needed to successfully implement pilot projects designed to reduce the dumping of unwanted fish by fishermen. The analysis of 15 European projects highlights the importance of involving the fishing industry in developing and implementing pilot projects.

Unwanted fish or other marine creatures which have been caught unintentionally are often discarded by fishermen by dumping them overboard. Discard rates in European fisheries vary from negligible in some small-scale coastal fisheries, to up to 70-90 per cent of the catch in some trawl fisheries. These high rates of discarding threaten the sustainability of European fisheries and marine biodiversity. The EU has mainly addressed this issue through measures that regulate fishing gear, such as net mesh sizes or the use of escape panels in nets¹.

A number of pilot projects have tested potential ways to reduce the amount of discarded fish, but many of these projects are not completed successfully or do not result in the techniques tested being implemented. New research, funded by the EU², analysed 15 such projects to identify the factors that lead to successful completion. The researchers used data taken from interviews with industry members, scientists and regulators, as well as literature, such as scientific reports, Regional Advisory Councils (RAC)³ communications and EU Commission publications.

All pilot projects analysed involved large-scale fisheries. Nine of the projects tested selective gear, such as changing the shape of meshes in the nets and designing escape panels. The other six tested closure of fishing areas, bans on discarding and improvements in data collection.

The results showed that 14 of the 15 pilots started successfully, nine were completed and four resulted in the implementation of the trialled techniques. The study identified seven key conditions that were responsible for the varying success of the projects and provided recommendations on how to meet these conditions, which included:

1. Fisheries with the highest discarding rates should be identified and targeted for pilot projects. All but two projects were triggered by a perceived crisis in the fishery industry, mainly related to quota cuts or fishery access restrictions. These were not necessarily the fisheries with the highest discard rates
2. Pre-pilot briefings should be conducted with skippers to determine appropriate rewards. Economic incentives were influential at all stages of implementation of the pilot projects and were most influential when the industry was involved in choosing incentives.
3. Scientists have a major role in providing technical and scientific expertise, but the knowledge of the fishermen themselves is just as important.
4. A steering group should be created that represents fishing industry members and includes scientists and a manager. Leadership was clearly linked to the success of pilots from either an individual or a group.
5. Enforcement is necessary both for completion of the pilot and implementation afterwards. This can be done by either voluntary compliance using publicity or legal sanctions with targets for reduction in discarding.

Stakeholder participation was evident in all the pilots and, in the more successful projects, fishermen were the senior partners. Funding was necessary for all pilots and in 10 cases up to 50 per cent of funding came from EU structural funds.

1. See http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/management_resources/conservation_measures/reducing_by_catches_en.htm
2. This research was funded by the European Commission's DG Maritime Affairs and Fisheries [Contract SI2.464199 for Tenders FISH/2006/15]
3. The Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) were set up by the EU to increase stakeholder participation in the Common Fisheries Policy process. RACs prepare recommendations and suggestions on fisheries. See: http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/governance/racs_en.htm

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