The EU has designed a new, reformed fisheries management

On 30 May 2013, the trilogue negotiations between the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission came to a close, finally reaching an agreement on the content of the new fisheries policy. The result is described as historic and lays a foundation for an entirely new fisheries management, which will protect and improve the marine environment, the fish stocks and the profitability of the fishermen. BalticSea2020 has met three parliamentarians from Fish for the Future, who talks about their views on the new Common Fisheries Policy, which comes into force early next year.

“I am very happy with the results. Of course there are other areas where we would have like to make more progress, but I think that we succeeded with so much more than we dared to hope for,” says Isabella Lövin, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament as a representative for the Swedish Green Party in 2009.

For more than 30 years, the EU's fisheries policy has failed to stop overfishing and discards, leading to negative consequences for fishermen, the marine environment and consumers. Opinion has been split among members of the European Parliament, the national delegations and the political groups, and the situation ahead of the vote on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in February 2013 was very uncertain.

In 2011, European MEPs from a range of political parties founded Fish for the Future (www.fishforthefuture.eu). The aim was to influence the reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy and to ensure that the new fisheries legislation resulted in more fish in the sea and more jobs for fishermen. Ahead of the vote, Fish for the Future worked hard to demonstrate how fisheries management could be improved and how fish stocks can be maintained if the Common Fisheries Policy is improved.

The parliamentary vote on February 6, 2013 made history, and the result exceeded expectations. The parliament showed by an overwhelming majority (502 for and 137 against) that they support reformed legislation that lays a foundation for an entirely new fisheries management – management that is in line with a number of Fish for the Future's recommendations.

“I actually didn't think it would go well, because when we started our work 14 of 27 member states wrote a letter to the European Commission in which they pretty much said that fishing policy can't be improved upon, “
says Christofer Fjellner, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament in 2004 as a representative for the Swedish Moderate Party. “When that was how it started, it felt as if the chances of getting something positive out of it were fairly small.”

But instead, the new fisheries policy had major, revolutionary changes, says Fish for the Future. The trilogues between the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission ended in May 2013, and new fisheries legislation had been produced. The new legislation primarily means that fish stocks will be managed and built up so that they reach a level that provides maximum sustainable yield (MSY), where possible by 2015 but no later than 2020. The new Common Fisheries Policy has also introduced a ban on discards, which means that fishermen are prohibited from dumping fish overboard. The new legislation also includes regionalisation, which means that member states around a marine area, such as the Baltic Sea, can themselves suggest how that area should be managed. Fish for the Future see the two biggest successes as the introduction of a ban on discards and MSY.

“The ban on discards is a revolution. It shouldn’t be, because it should be obvious that such large amounts of fish shouldn’t be thrown overboard. But now we’ve finally got change happening and I think it will speed up marine regeneration,” says Isabella Lövin.

Previously, it was illegal for fishermen to land fish that were too small or which exceeded their quota, resulting in fish being thrown overboard. Now, all fish that are caught must be brought ashore. Once on land, they will be included in their quota. In the future it will therefore be up to the fishermen to ensure that the catch does not exceed their quota. Fish for the Future believes that the ban on discards will mean a great deal for fishing, not least for knowing how many fish there are in the water. Christofer Fjellner says the ban has arrived not one day too soon.

“In the North sea alone, fishermen dump 800,000 to 1,000,000 tonnes of dead fish every year. For nothing. I’ve seen professional fishermen who discard up to 50 per cent of their catch. It’s not only that we prevent all these dead fish being thrown overboard, but especially that we get to know how many fish there are in the sea. If the requirement is to land all the fish you catch, then we will also know how much we catch and have better checks on our fishing,” says Christofer Fjellner.

In addition to the prohibition on discards, the new fisheries legislation establishes fixed targets for the size of fish stocks. No such targets currently exist, which means that the Council of Ministers makes decisions about quotas that are unsustainable in the long term. The new legislation includes demands that the ministers must ensure that fish stocks are managed according to the principle of maximum sustainable yield (MSY), which prevents the council from deciding on fishing quotas that are too high. Fish for the Future regards this as a great success for the ability to build fish stocks. Preferably, they would like the stocks to be above the level for MSY, so that fish stocks increase from year to year. Chris Davies, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament in 1999 as a representative of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, thinks that it may result in an excess of fish and provide a secure and profitable future for fishermen. However, he also thinks that the introduction of MSY is one of the greatest challenges in the introduction of the new fisheries policy.

“The main difference now is ensuring that fish stocks are managed using MSY when the ministers set the quotas for each year. The point is that the requirement is legally binding, so it should also be backed up by fishing with long-term management plans. The new fisheries policy isn’t yet in place, but there is space for this and as long as the ministers’ intention is to achieve a new and
sustainable fisheries policy, it will work out fine," says Chris Davies.

Regionalisation has also been introduced in the new fisheries policy. This means that the EU establishes the targets for the fisheries policy, and the member states themselves can decide how the targets should be achieved. Chris Davies says that this is something that parliamentarians have talked a lot about and that they also believe is very important for long-term fisheries management.

“I think it’s much better that the member states have greater decision-making powers about how targets should be achieved, because they know their own waters. However, we must also involve others, such as scientists, producer organisations and fishermen, to be able to set realistic targets and deadlines,” says Chris Davies.

The new Common Fisheries Policy will be implemented in 2014, and for the first time it looks as if it will protect the marine environment, increase fish stocks and improve conditions for profitable fishing fleets.

“Now it’s important that we don’t let it drop, that we make sure that what we have decided is implemented in the right way and that member states show that they are also using these new opportunities for improved management. That’s when the fisheries policy can make a difference,” says Isabella Lövin.

Isabella Lövin, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament in 2009 as a representative of the Swedish Green Party. Isabella Lövin's interest in the fisheries policy started when she wrote the book Tyst hav – jakten på den sista matfisken (Silent Sea – the Hunt for the Last Edible Fish, published by Ordförlag), which covers the decline in the marine fish stocks, among other things. She was upset that a public resource was so badly managed, as well as frustrated that Sweden couldn’t look after its own resources and seas in a better way. She thus wanted to influence and change the fisheries policy so that it ensured better fisheries management. Isabella Lövin is now a well-known advocate for fisheries issues and, after entering the parliament, is regarded as one of Sweden's most powerful people on environmental issues.
Chris Davies, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament in 1999 to represent the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Chris Davies has long been interested in the marine environment. He has been particularly worried about the decline in fish stocks and what is happening below the water’s surface. When the opportunity to influence fisheries policy arose, he decided to get involved. Chris Davies now thinks that the fisheries policy has a good foundation. He believes that the biggest success is the discards ban, and that the EU is now committed to achieving fish stocks that remain at a sustainable level.

Christofer Fjellner, member of Fish for the Future and elected to the European Parliament in 2004 as a representative of the Moderate Party. Fjellner is not a member of the Committee on Fisheries but has followed its work during his ten years in the parliament. He discovered that he often voted no to its proposals for fisheries policy, which is why he chose to become involved in Fish for the Future and influence the policy’s focus. Fjellner thinks that his personal success in the reform of the fisheries policy is that he succeeded in gaining the support of his European People’s Party (EPP), which didn’t previously support Fish for the Future’s recommendations. In general, Christofer Fjellner believes that the draft proposal was absolutely decisive in the new fisheries policy, as it prevents dead fish being thrown overboard for nothing, and also allows checks on how many fish we have in the seas.