

Opening Statement by the President

Let me welcome Contracting Parties and observers to this 24th Annual Meeting of the NEAFC Commission.

At present, there is a strong focus on the regional fisheries management organisations, the RFMOs. In FAO, in UN and in the preparations for the review conference of the 1995 UNFSA, the performance of RFMOs is very much to the fore.

Scholars and international agencies increasingly require data on how the RFMOs are doing their job, and there are calls for establishing principles to review their performance in meeting their objectives and the obligations and principles set forth in the relevant international instruments.

I am happy to report that in such evaluations NEAFC comes out quite favourably. The pragmatic and open minded approach taken by the Contracting Parties to a number of today's issues has made it possible to demonstrate that NEAFC has grasped most of the issues which, according to international instruments, should be in place to reach the goals of sustainable development for the fisheries sector whilst, at the same time, respecting the conservation of fish stocks and ecosystems.

Let me go briefly through some of that progress. The Contracting Parties have established management plans for the three large pelagic fisheries for mackerel, herring and blue whiting in the North East Atlantic and are in the process of establishing a management regime for redfish. These long term plans honour the scientific advice received from our scientific partner, ICES.

For deep-sea fisheries, the agreement on a reduction of 30% in overall effort was a breakthrough. We see the potential for improving that by moving from overall measures to fishery specific measures. Hopefully it will be possible to act on scientific advice in this respect next year.

Almost all the other issues of importance in international instruments have been met by NEAFC. Transparency is improved all the time through upgrading our website, which puts reports, papers, measures and basic texts into the public domain. Our control and enforcement measures are steadily upgraded in our Schemes. Our VMS database operating automatically 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year is second to none and efficiently supports inspection platforms in the NEAFC Regulatory Area. The time spent on inspection is increasingly healthily. NEAFC has taken a lead worldwide as custodian of the format most generally used in data communication between vessels at sea and fisheries monitoring centres.

The new tools of naming and shaming IUU vessels on A and B-lists have had a distinct effect. Two non-Contracting Parties with a history of offering flags of convenience for the majority of the IUU vessels in the North East Atlantic have acted. One is applying for cooperative non-Contracting Party status and the other has de-flagged and de-listed a number of vessels on our B-list. The ban on receiving landings from IUU vessels in the ports of the Contracting Parties seems to be effective.

Last year we agreed on an amendment to the Convention opening up for fast track procedures for handling disputes in NEAFC and - on a precautionary note - carried the Convention as far as it goes by closing five areas to all demersal fishing in order to protect vulnerable habitats. At this meeting there will be a discussion of a proposal for amending the Convention making it possible to go further in this direction, as far as science supports. Convention amendments take time, ratification processes can be lengthy. In the case of dispute settlement, the Contracting Parties have agreed to use the rules of procedures on dispute settlement on a voluntary basis and with respect to the amendments in the proposal at this year's meeting. Contracting Parties will hopefully support a general declaration on how to interpret the Convention until such time as those amendments are ratified.

In the light of all this, I am sure that, like me, you are rather mystified by a very vociferous campaign from the alliance of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition supported by some very important NGOs, including WWF, Seas at Risk and Greenpeace. The campaign rides on the excitement of new biological discoveries in the deep oceans and confuses this with the management of fisheries in the high seas and deep water.

Whilst nobody wants to interfere with the right of NGOs to fight for causes of their choosing, it is unfortunate that most of this campaign is based on a highly misleading report, which has got its facts wrong. The author of the report has not yet responded to requests for clarification of the data he has used in the report.

I think all Contracting Parties will agree that cooperating through regional fisheries organisations, as set out in international law and instruments, is a more efficient way to reach the goal of sustainable fisheries development than hijacking the General Assembly of the UN to manage fisheries. The point must be to strengthen and support regional arrangements and organisations, not diminishing their role.

Having said this, the failure to reach agreement on annual allocations in some fisheries for which there is agreement on long term plans is a matter of concern. This is important to be able to control fisheries to maintain the full reproductive capability of the stocks. There is a danger that prolonged fighting about percentages reduces the stock so that, when agreement is reached, the stock percentages will result in smaller quotas to all parties. I urge Contracting Parties to work hard to reach agreement on a fair and equitable basis.

I wish everybody a productive and efficient meeting.

On a practical point, may I remind you of the invitation to all for a reception that will be held in the area outside this room tomorrow between 6-8 pm.

(Give the floor to the Secretariat to give more, practical information).