

ITQs a User Right, not a Property Right, confirms EU Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs

Tuesday 13 July 2010, Brussels, Belgium. European Union (EU) Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Mrs Maria Damanaki, asserted that individual transferable rights, like ITQs, would not be applied at EU level, but were under consideration for application at Member States level. “I am not talking about privatization”, she said, “I am not talking about ownership rights, but about giving user rights for 10 years, after which this right returns to the state.”

Mrs Damanaki was meeting with representatives of artisanal and small scale fishers and with NGOs to discuss issues of mutual concern arising from the reform of the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The meeting had been requested by the Belgium office of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the New Under Ten Fishermen’s Association (NUTFA) from the UK. Issues to be raised included representation of artisanal and small-scale fishers in CFP and related consultation and decision taking processes; the adoption of a differentiated approach for small and large scale fisheries; safeguard measures for small-scale fleets *viz a viz* the introduction of individual tradable rights; criteria for defining sustainable fishing practices; and affirmative action to promote sustainable small-scale and artisanal fisheries.

Attending the meeting were representatives from Spain (Galicia and Catalonia), France (Brittany and Var regions), UK (NUTFA), and members of the Ocean2012 Alliance.

Xoan Lopez, Secretary of the Galician Federation of Fishing Cofradias highlighted that representation was one of the biggest problems facing small-scale fisheries. “We want to make sure that our message is passed on without intermediaries”, he said. “It is a complex matter, and needs to be addressed”.

Danièle le Sauce, President of the French NGO Pêche et Développement, raised concerns about ITQs. “We fear that ITQs are the thin edge of the wedge for privatising access to a common resource, and for paving the way to complete liberalisation of EU fisheries, bringing in such perverse effects as speculation, quota trading, leasing of rights, and so on. This will put artisanal fisheries at a distinct disadvantage. We feel that experiences with ITQs in several countries including Iceland, Denmark and Chile should caution against their introduction in the EU”.

Paul Joy, Co-Chairman of NUTFA, contended that the only way forward for CFP reform was through technical measures, based on reducing the carbon footprint, and using more selective and less destructive gears, with which artisanal coastal fisheries were already complying. He highlighted that although NUTFA had a no-discards’ policy, NUTFA members were being forced to discard because they had not been allocated a fair quota for many commercial species.

Mrs Damanaki reassured the meeting that such issues were at the core of CFP reform, but that they were also very controversial. “The current reform process could in no way relate to the 2002 reform”, she said. “We need a radical reform. We have a difficult job,, but we can’t accept anything less than real reform.”

She acknowledged that representation was a key issue, and that it is important to secure better representation for everyone, including small-scale fishers and NGOs. “It is our duty to have a better structure to represent small scale fisheries. They have weaker structures, and we need to make a level playing field with the bigger players”, she noted.

With regards to a differentiated regime, Damanaki confirmed her support for such an approach, but warned that many Member States did not want differentiated treatment for small-scale fisheries. “We have to persuade them”, she advised, “for three reasons. We really believe, based on scientific information, that small-scale fisheries are more sustainable and have a lower environmental footprint. Small-scale fisheries are also much more friendly to employment, and this is a key issue. We also recognize that small-scale fisheries are very important for the survival of coastal communities, for their identity, culture, history and way of life.”

But to achieve all this, Damanaki contended that “we need a very accurate definition of small-scale fisheries at EU level.” She argued that if special support is to be provided through EU funds, then a definition was essential, based on length of vessel, gears (selectivity), capacity, and other criteria.

On the issue of individual transferable fishing rights, the EU Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Commissioner was adamant that tradable rights were an essential tool for reducing capacity without using public money. “We don’t have a lot of money, and we have to give some compensation to the vessel owners. If they can sell their fishing rights and vessels they can leave the fishery and get something back in return.” She also highlighted that safeguard measures would be applied in small-scale fisheries, with small-scale fishers able to sell their rights within but not outside their sector.

For her last words, Mrs Damanaki chose the issue of discards. “This is a very serious problem. We have to do something about it”, she emphasised.

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ICSF is an international non-governmental organization that works towards the establishment of equitable, gender-just, self-reliant and sustainable fisheries, particularly in the small-scale, artisanal sector. For more, please visit www.icsf.net, <http://eussf.icsf.net/>