Press Release

For immediate release.

North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission Compromises Deep-sea Protection

London, 17th November 2006. After a week of negotiations, the intergovernmental commission responsible for managing deep-water fishing in the North East Atlantic made some progress on improving the protection of deep-water fish and corals, but allowed the tougher decisions to be hijacked by the short-term fisheries interests of isolated Contracting Parties. The UK’s Marine Conservation Society and Seas At Risk, a Brussels-based international environmental organisation, says the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) has a long way to go before it fulfils it’s commitment to provide long-term conservation of fish stocks and biodiversity.

The meeting considered a number of recommendations from its own working groups:

- To stop the expansion of destructive deep-water fisheries into new previously un-fished areas.
- To end fishing on highly vulnerable and heavily depleted stocks of Orange Roughy.
- To close to bottom trawling two areas - Hatton and Rockall Banks - where fragile cold-water coral reefs are known to exist.

In all three cases the recommendations were based on scientific advice from ICES, the internationally recognised authority on the scientific aspects of fisheries management, but were refused or weakened by the meeting. The meeting also failed to act on ICES advice to stop fishing for blue ling and deep-water sharks and to dramatically scale-down fishing activity on all other deep-water stocks in the NEAFC area.

On the first recommendation, the meeting refused to stop the expansion of deepwater fisheries into new areas, and only agreed to reduce current levels of overall fishing effort by a token 5 %. This is something of a sham considering reliable fishing effort data is rarely provided, and member states appear able to pick and choose their reference levels.

In the case of Orange Roughy, the Faroe Islands refused to agree to a prohibition, despite having only one boat that targets the species. Instead they chose short-term self-interest, with a view to mining the stocks of this incredibly vulnerable species in the future. The meeting therefore agreed to an interim suspension of the fishery (while it is out of season anyway) until an Extraordinary Meeting of NEAFC in June 2007 revisits the issue.

A similarly selfish refusal by Russia, who failed to agree with the EU proposal for closure of the coral rich south west Rockall Bank where they fish intensively, led the meeting to leave that area open for further destruction and only close the other proposed areas. “Although some steps have been made in the right direction, it bodes very badly for NEAFC’s future ability to offer real protection for vulnerable deep-water fish and corals if it’s decision-making process can be hijacked in this way”, said Dr Bryce Beukers-Stewart, Fisheries Policy Officer with the Marine Conservation Society.

Activities at NEAFC will be watched carefully by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, which is currently negotiating global measures to protect deep-water habitats from bottom trawling. “The assumption at the UN is that regional fisheries management authorities are best placed to protect vulnerable habitats from bottom trawling, but NEAFC has shown yet again that it lacks both the political will and the institutional arrangements necessary to fully protect deep-water stocks and the wider environment”, said Dr Monica Verbeek, Fisheries Policy Officer at Seas At Risk.
In a related development the EU Fisheries Council will meet next week to negotiate the 2007 and 2008 Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and quotas for deep-water fisheries in European waters. The outcome of NEAFC’s Annual Meeting is disappointing, but now the EU must show that they at least are capable of providing real protection for the deep-sea, one of the richest but most vulnerable environments on the planet.

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**NOTES FOR EDITORS**

- Seas At Risk is a Brussels-based independent non-governmental federation of environmental organisations concerned with the protection and restoration of the marine environment. More information on Seas At Risk and deep-water fisheries can be found on their website: www.seas-at-risk.org

- The Marine Conservation Society is the UK Charity dedicated to the protection of the marine environment and its wildlife. Since its formation in 1983, MCS has become a recognised authority on marine and coastal conservation and is regularly consulted by Government for its views on a range of marine issues. MCS provides information and guidance on many aspects of marine conservation and produces the annual Good Beach Guide, as well as promoting public participation in volunteer projects and surveys such as Adopt-a-Beach, Sea Search and Basking Shark Watch. It has also produced the consumer guide to eating sustainably captured fish The Good Fish Guide and the associated website: www.fishonline.org. For more information: www.mcsuk.org

- NEAFC regulates fisheries in the North-East Atlantic Ocean. There are currently five contracting parties: the European Community, Denmark (on behalf of the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Iceland, Norway and the Russian Federation. NEAFC convened for its 25th Annual Meeting from 13-17th November at its offices in London (22 Berner’s Street, + 44 (0) 207 6310016). Seas At Risk and the Marine Conservation Society have been admitted to the Annual Meeting as observers since 2002. Further information about NEAFC can be found on their homepage: www.neafc.org

- ICES (International Council for Exploration of the Sea) is an international science organisation studying North Atlantic marine ecosystems and the living resources they sustain. It works with experts from its 20 Member Countries including the Russian Federation and the USA. One of the tasks of ICES is the provision of scientific information on effects of fisheries and advice on fisheries management in the North-East Atlantic in response to requests by, for example, NEAFC and the European Commission. They advise NEAFC every year on the status of stocks and on quotas in the NEAFC regulatory area. The ICES advice on fish stocks (ACFM 2006) is available on the web: www.ices.dk

- At its Annual Meeting in 2004 NEAFC moved to cut effort levels in deep-water fisheries by 30%. However, the 30% cut was based on the maximum effort observed since the fisheries commenced. In some cases this allowed for fishing effort to actually increase from that observed in recent years, even though current fishing levels are thought by ICES to be unsustainable.

- Deep-sea fish species like are characterised by slow growth, extreme longevity, and very low levels of reproduction. This makes them highly vulnerable to over-fishing; the serial depletion around the world of the deep-sea fish species Orange Roughy is testimony to this. Some scientists even consider that deep-sea fish stocks cannot be fished sustainably at all.

- The Rockall and Hatton Banks are located on and around the 200 nm limit off the NW of the United Kingdom.

- In July 2006, a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) report examined the implementation of a 2004 UNGA resolution for Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), like NEAFC, to take urgent action including the prohibition of bottom trawling on sensitive marine ecosystems. The report concluded that current measures are far from sufficient. Since then, many nations including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the US, have declared support for a prohibition on high seas bottom trawling. The UNGA is currently negotiating in New York on measures by RFMOs and whether to introduce a moratorium on bottom trawling in unregulated areas of the high seas.