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The MSY objective: the EU's progress so far, and raising the bar

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The 2013 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP; No 1380/2013) introduced in the EU for the first time a legally binding objective to restore and maintain populations of harvested species above levels which can produce maximum sustainable yield (MSY). This objective is fundamental to EU fisheries management and is necessary for the achievement of Good Environmental Status under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (2008/56/EC). In order to achieve this objective, EU decision-makers must use the MSY requirement as the basis for both short- and long-term decisions. However, adherence to this objective has so far been limited. Annual catch limits have continued to be set too high, and the first multiannual plan agreed under the new CFP has allowed for the use of fishing mortality ranges above the point value consistent with achieving MSY. This was based on arguments for avoiding the under-exploitation of some stocks and to account for multi-species interactions. However, allowing for fishing mortality above levels that are too high for some stocks to produce MSY is clearly not in line with the CFP's MSY objective, and will lead to overexploitation of these stocks. It is also not in line with the CFP's requirement to implement the ecosystem-based approach because it will maintain higher fishing pressure on the ecosystem, as opposed to minimising the negative impacts. The next CFP reform should better reflect the fact that healthier stocks bring greater economic and environmental benefits, through the introduction of lower exploitation targets and more precautionary limits.

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