EU Ministers Back Ban on Fish Discards

DON MELVIN,Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Officials from the 27 European Union countries proposed Wednesday a phased-in ban on the discarding of unwanted fish by fishing vessels, but environmentalists immediately condemned the measure as too weak.

Dead and dying fish are often thrown overboard if they do not meet quotas or fishermen's preferences, creating a huge waste of for the ecosystem and business alike. The aim of the proposed measure is to eliminate waste and preserve fish stocks, some of which are dwindling dangerously due to overfishing.

The proposal, approved early Wednesday in Brussels, is considered less stringent that one approved earlier this month by the European Parliament. Negotiations will have to take place to try to find a version on which the Parliament, the national officials, and the European Commission can all agree.

The measure passed earlier by the Parliament — by a vote of 502-137 — would also include a legally binding obligation to end overfishing and rebuild stocks, stop aid to member states that flout the rules, and make catch reporting requirements much tougher.

Wednesday's proposal by the national officials calls for phasing in the discard ban between 2014 and 2019, but it also includes significant exemptions. The agreement on the proposal was reached in the early hours, after a difficult all-night meeting.

Environmentalists said the proposal was too little and too slow, and blamed countries with significant fishing interests for blocking a stronger package.

"France and Spain led a group of countries into dismantling a hard-earned discard ban that was overwhelmingly passed through the European Parliament last month," the Oceana advocacy group said in a statement.

"Fisheries Ministers are steamrolling the will of the people because they lack the political courage to do the right thing," said Xavier Pastor, the group's executive director in Europe.

The environmental group Greenpeace, too, was disappointed.

"The exemption of certain fish species called for by Spain, Portugal and France was avoided, but ministers are backing a partial ban at best," said Saskia Richartz, the group's EU fisheries policy director. "It's not a ban if you allow thousands of tons of fish to continue to be wasted for years to come."

The Eurostat agency has released statistics showing that catches declined from 8.07 million tons in 1995 to 4.94 million tons in 2010 as stocks of fish such as cod

and Bluefin tuna dwindled dramatically. Quotas for fishermen also became more restrictive to reflect the dearth of supplies.

North Sea stocks of cod, the emblematic fish in the Atlantic EU waters, declined by three quarters over three decades and special campaigns to revive the species have long struggled. Bluefin tuna, once the pride of the Mediterranean, has seen stocks drop by 80 percent over the same time.

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