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Live and let die: The rapid development of research to assess survival of discards in European fisheries

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On 1st January 2014 a new EU Common Fisheries Policy came into force and with it, under Article 15, a discard ban or landing obligation for regulated species, to be phased in between 2015 and 2019. The policy includes a number of exemptions from the landing obligation, including in paragraph 2(b) for “*species for which scientific evidence demonstrates high survival rates, taking into account the characteristics of the gear, of the fishing practices and of the ecosystem*”. The ‘high survival exemption’ has generated considerable interest from the fishing industry and national fisheries managers among others, because arguably, organisms alive at the point of release, should be given the opportunity to live and not be brought ashore dead for little or no profit. The new policy text raised two immediate questions, ‘how do you measure discard survival?’ and ‘what is “high” survival?’

This paper will present the story of how research into estimating the survival of discarded fish, motivated by recent policy change, has swiftly developed in Europe. The story will be told by the group of researchers and industry representatives who have been tasked with generating evidence on discard survival. It will include:

- Initial reactions from the EU Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) and the instigation of a new ICES group WKMEDS
- The development of guidelines to conduct scientific survival assessments
- Funding for research to estimate discard survival
- Harmonising research methods across EU scientific institutes
- The expectations and motivations of fishery managers and the fishing industry
- Working in partnership with the fishing industry to generate survival estimates
- Estimated discard survival rates
- The reaction to survival estimates from fisheries managers and the fishing industry
- The application of the research in fisheries management
- The implications of new survival evidence for other areas of fisheries science