

## Opinion: Was the EU's ban on electric fishing the right decision?

February 19, 2019 by Laura Scherer, Jan Boersema, Leiden University



Shrimp trawler. Credit: NOAA FishWatch

Last week, on 13 February 2019, the EU approved the ban on pulse trawling. This followed the vote for a ban by the European Parliament on 16 January 2018. Half of the 84 Dutch pulse trawling vessels must stop immediately; the other half will receive a transitional arrangement until July 2021. Outcomes of ongoing research can reopen the discussion.

Pulse trawling is an innovative, electric fishing technique, which could partially replace conventional bottom trawling, especially beam trawling. Pulse trawling offers some advantages over conventional bottom trawling, such as a lower by-catch and lower fuel use. However, opponents point to valid concerns about the technique, such as the potential harm to electrosensitive fishes and the increased competition for small-scale fishers.

The NGO Bloom who strongly influenced the EU's decision about the ban of pulse trawling point out that also beam trawling is not "a viable or acceptable option for Europe", but with their advocacy for a ban on pulse trawling, they have indirectly promoted beam trawling. The question is not if pulse trawling has negative impacts. It has. The question is rather how the impacts of pulse trawling compare to those of conventional bottom trawling.

### Animal welfare as a new argument in the debate

Besides the advantages and disadvantages mentioned above, an important further consideration is the overall animal welfare, going beyond electrosensitive fishes. Compared to conventional trawling, animal welfare loss might be lower in pulse trawling. Fewer animals are affected and especially the many bottom-dwelling invertebrates are expected to suffer less because the seafloor is not disturbed anymore as in the case of beam trawling. This can outweigh larger harm induced on fewer fishes which are sensitive to the electric stimulation, most of which are targeted and will anyway be slaughtered soon after exposure.

Ecological pressures through cascading effects are also expected to be reduced in pulse trawling with less animals directly affected. Although a more efficient technology like pulse trawling could enhance overfishing, it is of little concern in Europe due to policy regulations and demand limits. Overall, the scientific evidence is still inconclusive, but speaks in favour of pulse trawling and, therefore, the ban seems premature.