OPINION

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

Response to EC request for advice on Sole and Whiting in the Irish Sea (VIIa)

July 2010

1. Sole VIIa

The NWWRAC notes that the scientific advice from ICES has been for reductions in fishing mortality for many years and zero catch and a recovery plan since 2007 due SSB being below B_{lim}. The ICES summary sheet also points out "*that beam trawl effort has declined by 75% between 2003 and 2009. This is consistent with the F reductions estimated in the assessment.*"

The NWWRAC would point out that despite the continued weak recruitment the Fishing Mortality in 2009 is close to the lowest ever observed for this stock. This is considered to be a very positive development. Given that this is a sole stock several years of low fishing mortality are needed for the benefits of the reduced mortality to feed through to increased SSB. The perception of the industry is that effort has reduced substantially and that the stock will recover in time. However, it is noted that a large percentage of the scientific data is based on reduced landings. This is not taking into account the sustainable decision by fishermen to reduce effort in sole fisheries and accordingly misses the effect on the SSB.

The NWWRAC considers that in lieu of a dedicated recovery plan (which is considered administratively to burdensome by NWWRAC) more scientific assessment is required of the impact of the important TAC reductions over the last years and the additional self-imposed effort reduction in the sole fishery. It is believed that such an assessment might establish an SSB close to B_{lim} in 2012. If it is thus shown that the stock recovers and recruitment increases F_{msy} may be considered as a target in a long-term management plan.

2. Whiting VIIa

The whiting stock in the Irish Sea is at a very low level and the scientific advice has been for zero catch since 2001. ICES point out that there is "*no targeted whiting fishery in the Irish Sea. Whiting are bycatch (and discarded) within in the main Irish Sea fisheries. Otter trawlers utilising 70-90mm mesh sizes are the primary gear associated with whiting*".

Economically whiting are not an important species in the Irish Sea and as such there is no pressing economic imperative to rebuild the stock. Nevertheless from ecosystem perspective there is a need to rebuild the stock to a sustainable level.

Clearly the most important source of mortality is the *Nephrops* otter trawl fishery particularly in the Western Irish Sea which is coincident with the main whiting nursery area. Discard estimates for 2009 are 1,500 t which is 15 times greater than the landings.

The ICES summary sheet points to a number of technical solutions (grids, separator trawls, large mesh top sheets etc.) that could deliver substantial catch reductions in whiting and other species by-caught in the *Nephrops* fishery. Effective implementation of similar technical measures has always been an issue in the past and has not delivered the catch and fishing mortality reductions needed to rebuild the whiting stock. Nevertheless the NWWRAC considers that such technical solutions can achieve the necessary catch reductions for whiting whilst maintaining a viable *Nephrops* fishery. In addition the effort reductions in TR1 and TR2 as part of the cod long term plan will also result in reduced mortality in whiting.

Given the current state of information on catch levels (i.e. no ICES estimate of catches for recent years) and the fact that the TAC is not constraining catches clearly reducing the TAC further will not deliver any fishing mortality reductions. NWWRAC would propose that an integrated fisheries management plan be developed for the *Nephrops* fisheries in VIIa.

One key objective of such a plan would be to reduce by-cathes and discards of whiting, cod and other vulnerable species in these *Nephrops* fisheries. The plan would include current baseline estimates of discard rates and volumes and Minimum Acceptable Level of by-catch as a target. A "results based management framework" whereby the onus is on the industry to adapt fishing behaviour to achieve these targets seems like the most appropriate way of achieving the objectives of the plan. The NWWRAC has already held one focus group on the management of Irish Sea Fisheries in September 2009 which is considered to have been a positive starting point[1].

The development of such a plan would be in line with the Commissions' views that "*the Irish Sea required a broad fisheries plan that dealt with by-catch fisheries and diversion of effort*". The development of specific management measures for whiting outside an integrated fisheries management plan does not seem practical or appropriate.

---ENDS---

[1] Meeting report and presentations available on the NWWRAC website: http://www.nwwrac.org/Meetings/Meetings_ENG/Navigation.php?id=375&language=English