

REPORT

**North Western Waters Regional Advisory Committee
Working Group 4 – Irish Sea (Vlla)
04th July 2008
14.00-17:00
Madrid (Spain)**

1. Welcome

- Adoption of Agenda: the agenda was formally adopted without changes.
- Adoption of Report of the last meeting (Manchester, March 2008): the meeting report of was adopted by the members without comments.

2. Review of ICES Advice 2008 for Vlla

Martin Pastoors (Vice-Chair of ICES Advisory Committee) gave a detailed presentation on the relevant stocks for the Irish Sea. He also stressed that new advice was launched this year for first time on sharks and rays, but no new advice was provided for some stocks such as herring and whiting in Vlla due to the lack of relevant new data available for assessment. In these cases, ICES deemed to have no basis for revision and reiterated the advice existing from last year.

- Cod
Stock age-based assessment has been based on several surveys and a biologically adapted model of estimation of both total catches and unaccounted removals (being 3 times the official landings due to substantial misreporting of catches and landings in the past). The degree of assessment is uncertain and only refers to stock trends. There is an indication of high discard rates for ages 0 and 1 for some fleets. The level of recruitment and spawning stock biomass (SSB) has been historically very low, and the fishing mortality (F) is high and far above the F_{pa} , with no signs of decrease. **The ICES advice for 2009 is zero catches** -TAC 2008: 1199 t-
- Haddock
The assessment was based on survey and has indicated only the stock trends (no forecast). The catch data remain very uncertain mainly due to misreporting (also by species) and substantial discarding of young fish. There is an increase in the adult stock abundance and recruitment and the total mortality (Z) appears to be relatively stable (although there is no well defined trend). **The ICES advice for 2009 is no increase in effort** -TAC 2008: 1238 t-
- Plaice
Stock assessment is based on one age-based survey and two biomass surveys (containing no age information) There have been high rates of discards (up to 80% in number) but they have not been included in the assessment, which has a strong bias due to the overestimation of stock sizes (both SSB and recruitment) in the past. The fishing mortality has been decreasing at a very low level (around natural mortality), and the SSB is increasing. If a level of F_{pa} was chosen that would result in a substantial increase in TAC and landings. **The ICES advice for 2009 is to maintain level of F 0.1 (high long term yield fishing mortality) corresponding to landings of 1430 t** -TAC 2008: 1849 t-

- Sole
Sole and plaice are less closely linked than in other fishing areas. The age-based assessment for sole has been calibrated with two surveys. There has been a recent change in exploitation rates (affecting to younger fish) and a major revision of assessment has been undertaken in 2007. Low levels of recruitment and SSB (below Blim) are shown in recent years, although there has been a slight increase. The estimation of F is coming down very quickly (near Fpa). **The ICES advice for 2009 is zero catch + recovery plan –TAC 2008: 670t-**
- Whiting
No new advice was given due to poor quality of input data. There are no changes in perception of the stock (with high discard rates and low stock size), therefore **ICES repeats advice from last year for 2009 to the lowest possible level of catches.**
- Nephrops
Nephrops stocks in VII have started are assessed on a bi-annual basis, with management measures at unit level (the so-called functional units or FU). The stock has proven to be stable and even increasing in general terms (although there are some exceptions). Landings information have improved since 2006 (more reliable since the entry into force of Buyers and Sellers Regulations in Ireland and UK) and deemed underestimated. The abundance indexes are relatively stable, although the Irish Sea in particular has shown a continuous decline through the underwater TV survey. However, this decline has come from a very high level, so it is considered still to be stable. **The ICES advice for 2009 is to constrain fisheries to recent levels of effort at FU.**
- Sharks and rays
It is the first time that these stocks area assessed for this area (VIIa, sometimes VII as a whole). The assessment is based on survey indicators (sometimes CPUE)
Some rays and sharks are reason for concern, being severely depleted (angel shark, white skate) or depleted (common skate); **ICES recommends no fisheries for those.** Other ray species appear to be increasing (e.g. thornback ray)

- Open discussion and recommendations:

- Cod

It is noted by the fishing industry members that cod catches have increased during the last months. There is a perception of more abundance and the level of discards (especially of adult fish) remains at high rates due to low TAC and quota. It is also noted that the Irish Sea Discarding Program has already contributed to help to improve data and information for these stocks, and concluded that many other factors than fishing exploitation are causing cod mortality.

It is acknowledged the necessity of improving data from discard observation and thus it is important that the Irish Enhanced Data and Discarding Programme gives its first results by providing input from stakeholders. It is agreed that scientists and industry will work together on getting more reliable, complete and accurate information via these and other initiatives. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to think about how to integrate and incorporate all relevant and useful stakeholders' information on the assessment of the stocks.

There is a common view on the necessity of moving from artificial TAC based on estimations of SSB towards a setting of objectives based on a long term F. This will be only possible by reducing uncertainty (e.g. on unaccounted removals) by improving joint data collection.

- Haddock

It is noted that scientific advice has not been adequately dealt with the correlation between haddock and cod SSB trends. The current effort has proven to be sustainable and this would lead to significant increase in TAC for next year. However, the uncertainty in catch data makes it difficult the task of setting clear targets and estimating by-catches of other species, e.g. cod.

The main question arisen in the debate is where do we want to go in relation to this fishery: is there a need to achieve optimal resources (i.e. MSY) if it results in further reduction of effort and TACs? Or by contrary it should be more beneficial to maintain TAC level as it is now?

It is agreed that the Chairman and the official rapporteur will draft a formal proposal for discussion to be submitted to the Executive Committee in relation to haddock management.

- Plaice

Even though indications of trends are positive for this stock, the ICES representative warns about the necessity of improving methodology to reduce uncertainty, be consistent in the approach to the assessment and improve the level of confidence in data. ICES has made a presentation of a forecast for many alternative options, being his advice to maintain current levels of F which will lead to an increase in TAC and catches.

Some members identify this fishery as a reference to achieve MSY targets very soon. It is also an example of “good practices” that could be widely spread to public opinion to improve fishermen image.

- Sole

It is noted that the crisis of the fishing industry due to fuel prices will result in a diversification of fishing activities of the fleet, seeking the most profitable ones, and due to the current scientific advice this fishery will probably be no longer attractive. It also seems that the acceleration of F and SSB might be caused more by environmental factors than to an effective increase of effort.

- Whiting

Some members ask to the Commission representative the reasons why the Recovery Plan has not been put into place (political commitment, reduction of TAC during previous years...), who will forward this query to his relevant colleagues and come back with a response soon.

- Nephrops

The advice of a 15% reduction in TAC is regarded as worrying by the fishing industry, taking into account the important economic value of these species for many fishing fleets. It is noted that, according to the current TAC levels, no increase or displacement of fishing effort might be expected unless it is the result of a political management decision (e.g. closure of cod areas...)

The European Commission should base its TAC figures on basis of best science available, and should recognize and consider on its analysis the on-going work –conducting trials in Northern Ireland- being carried out by the Irish Sea Data Enhanced and Discarding Programme to improve discards knowledge and information (now still very patchy and combined with other fisheries).

The ICES representative precises that discard patterns of Nephrops in VIIa are different than in other parts of area VII, the TAC including the removals and being still much higher than reported official landings last years.

It is agreed that the following recommendations will be submitted to the Executive Committee:

- To draft a letter expressing concerns in regard to connection between fishing effort, landings and TAC and the combined interpretation of these three variables.
- To stress the importance of cooperation in developing a sound advice on VIIa Nephrops fishery as a key element of the EC proposal on discards.

- Sharks and Rays

The Chairman asks to ICES representative if there is any specific input for Irish Sea for these stocks. The ICES representative replies that not many information is available on reports from surveys and they cannot show any specific trends (see table on sharks and rays advice in ICES presentation) In particular, concern is raised on the situation of spurdog fishery. Last ICES advice was released in April but it contains no new or additional information, reporting the same state than two years ago: the stock is considered to be depleted. The recommendation is the same than in previous advice: no directed fishery in order to protect the spawning aggregations.

3. Discussion on 5% by-catch rule for Spurdog in the Irish Sea

The NWWRAC Secretariat informs that no response has been received from the Commission up to date in relation to the NWWRAC Opinion submitted in May requesting that the Commission undertakes a thorough review of the 5% by-catch rule on a trip-by-trip basis to consider it in light of the unpredictable nature of the aggregations of these species; the potential for this measure to cause discards; and the propensity for this measure to rebuild stocks (for more information, see the full text of this Opinion in the publications section of NWWRAC website: www.nwwrac.org)

Alan Mc Culla reads a statement made by Joe Borg published in the Irish Skipper of July 2008: Mr. Borg affirms in a letter addressed to an Irish MEP that, according to the most recent scientific advice, this stock is considered to be depleted in the northwest Atlantic. But next it indicates that "*experimental assessments indicate the stock is at a record low level*". Alan poses the question if this affirmation, based on uncertain "experimental assessments", would not be in contradiction with the principle of providing the best available scientific advice required by the Commission when assessing stocks.

The ICES representative confirms that available information does not allow comparison to be made between level of abundance and exploitation rates. Concerning how to address the problem of variation and unpredictability of spurdog by-catches, he states that there should be more useful, rather than establishing a maximum limit 5% by-catch per trip, to explore the possibility of establishing a maximum landing length size for spurdog, insofar as it is clear that for this species the animals which are larger than 1 meter are always adult females, ensuring thus that reproductive females are protected.

It is agreed as recommendation from this Working Group to draft and recirculate a new paper regarding spurdog incorporating the new information provided from the ICES representative regarding maximum landing size length for (female) spurdog.

4. Update on the Irish Sea Data Enhancement and Discards Project (Lorcan O'Cinnéide)

The Chairman stresses the importance of this project as a point of reference with huge potential to being exportable to similar initiatives followed by other RACs and for the improvement on the analysis of catches and discards composition.

This might be also become an example of “good practices” for building science-industry partnership projects, involving fishermen in the collection and submission of accurate data.

Regarding the timing of this Project, it has been projected a period of 6-9 months to give a form of review upon a number of stocks, and to produce a concise report on methodology, trials, strengths and weaknesses identified, etc.

The Steering Committee will meet in September and adopt a decision to refine the type of forums of information which is necessary to obtain such data.

In the Republic of Ireland, even though the Project is facing some financial difficulties, the core of participating vessels is giving good quality cooperation and the work is in progress. In Northern Ireland, the project is going smooth, there are 130 trawlers committed and involved on this project, providing preliminary information and data which shows that level of discards is far below than what was assumed for many stocks presented for Irish Sea.

Two short term aims for this year are:

- To deliver some sound input and analysis of collected data (even if partial) to incorporate the valuable information available in the advice for 2009.
- To insert this data into the EC ongoing consultation on discards, by presenting preliminary outcomes to scientists before final decisions are made.

The ICES representative is agree with this last point and invites the Project managers to come with digested information and present their preliminary results and disseminate any valuable information they may have. He transmits his previous experience as participant in a project in Holland and identifies as a key issue the managing of expectations from fishermen contributing to the program: they should be aware of the possibility of not getting desired short-term results on TAC and quotas and keep providing data.

5. Future management of scallop dredging in Welsh Territorial Waters (Jerry Percy)

Due to the absence at the meeting of the presenter of this topic, and any representative from the Welsh fishing industry, it is decided to postpone the discussion of this issue to the next Working Group 4 meeting.

Tom Bryan-Brown read a brief note by mandate of Jim Portus summarizing the position of SWFPO organization in relation to this issue.

6. Agreed proposals to put forward to the Executive Committee

The Chairman briefly summarizes the main outcomes of this meeting and he states the following proposals to put forward the Executive Committee meeting:

* Cod: To present a paper for debate about the ways of integrating and incorporating all relevant and useful stakeholders' information on the assessment of the stocks, by moving from artificial TAC based on estimations of SSB towards a setting of objectives based on a long term F.

* Haddock: To draft a formal proposal for discussion in relation to haddock management (timescale, main objectives to reach in terms of F and SSB, socio-economic effects, etc.)

* Nephrops:

- To draft a letter expressing concerns in regard to connection between fishing effort, landings and TAC and the combined interpretation of these three variables.
- To stress the importance of cooperation in developing a sound advice on VIIa Nephrops fishery as a key element of the EC proposal on discards.

* Spurdog: To draft and recirculate a new paper regarding spurdog incorporating the new information provided from the ICES representative regarding maximum landing size length for female spurdog.

* Irish Sea Enhanced Data Project:

- To deliver some sound input and analysis of collected data (even if partial) to be incorporated for the EC advice for 2009.
- To insert this data into the EC ongoing consultation on discards, by presenting preliminary outcomes to be subsequently submitted to scientists before final decisions are made.

7. AOB

The Chairman makes a brief reference to the discussion on the fuel crisis maintained within WG1, expressing the solidarity and interest of the members of this Working Group for this issue, showing their concern and committing to work hard on finding adequate solutions to it.

The Chairman closed the meeting and thanks members for his attendance.

The meeting was adjourned at 17 h.

Chairman: Lorcan O'Cinnéide
Rapporteur: Alexandre Rodríguez

21st July 2008