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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES
THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

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M. Sam Lambourn
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Bord Iscaigh Mhara
Crofton Road
Dun Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Ireland

Subject: NWWRAC advice on Rajidae

Dear Mr Lambourn,

Thank you for your advice of 22 April 2009 concerning skates and rays (*Rajidae*).

Our services agree with the RAC's views on the difficulties involved in the identification of different species. We believe nevertheless that this difficulty should be addressed so that skippers are able to distinguish at least the most vulnerable species. This is likely to entail a need for specific training. In this respect, I would note that there are initiatives already at work. The lower Normandy Regional Committee has developed a draft identification guide for use by fishermen with practical information and pictures that should help to differentiate rays and skates. We encourage RAC members to develop similar guidelines in close collaboration with ICES and/or STECF.

Concerning the ban on undulate ray (*Raja undulata*) and common skate (*Dipturus batis*), these measures were agreed at Council last December based on a Commission proposal which, in turn, was based on the latest scientific advice from ICES-STEFCF. While there may always be concerns regarding the economic effects of this kind of measures, they were proposed because their absence would have caused an even greater economic detriment to the sector, considering the poor state of conservation of the resources in question. They are also necessary to ensure a proper monitoring for these skates and rays fisheries which, in large areas of the EU Atlantic waters remained in an unregulated state till last year.

Some studies on survival rates are currently being carried out, namely in the UK¹. Some final results have been recently published and more are still expected as these studies are

¹ "The survival of skates (*Rajidae*) caught by demersal trawlers fishing in UK waters" by Enever, et al.; Fisheries Research 97 (2009) 72–76

difficult and require more time. However, Commission proposals took into account the information available on this key issue, even as preliminary results, thereby adopting the required precautionary approach for stocks deemed to be in a poor state.

With regard to the Undulate ray (*R. undulata*), it is important to bear in mind that the landing ban stems from the fact that this species has simply disappeared from recent groundfish surveys. The stock has a very patchy distribution, possibly forming discrete stocks, which make the undulate ray very sensitive to local depletion. In particular, the species has disappeared from the English beam trawl survey in Division VIIId in the last two years. Furthermore, ICES and STECF recommend to ban target fisheries in the Celtic Sea as the data available points clearly to the stock being in a depleted state.

Concerning the blue skate, or common skate, (*D. batis*), ICES / STECF advice is very clear indicating a depleted state. It was formerly widely distributed over much of the North Sea but is now found only rarely, and only in the northern North Sea. In the Celtic Sea, it was formerly distributed in the Irish Sea (VIIa) but is now rarely found. The species is now mostly found off Northwest Scotland, West of Ireland and in deeper waters of the Celtic Sea. This depicts an overall quite alarming state and is indeed a reason for serious concern.

As you will recall, information on the approach to our fishing opportunities proposals for all stocks was presented to ACFA and the RACs during a joint meeting in Brussels on October 16th, 2008. Issues pertaining to skates and rays were also dealt with in the framework of the frontloading exercise, due in particular to the need to establish a quota allocation for these new stocks in various areas where this fishery was previously unregulated. This process was lengthy and laborious. However, last year's scientific advice was the first one provided regarding the state of stocks and management options for rays and skates in the Celtic Sea and Iberian waters. Based on this advice and discussions, and consistent with the EU Action plan for elasmobranchs, the Commission reaffirms the need to keep these fisheries under close monitoring, and maintain a careful focus on those stocks that are in a poor state.

I hope that the RAC can share our concerns as outlined above, and that your members will help the Commission in gathering information that can support a common effort to overcome this problem.

Yours sincerely,



Fokion Fotiadis