



European Commission
 Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs
 And Fisheries
 Director-General Ms Lowri Evans
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**Betreft: Action plan “The Irish Sea Sole-stock: A “Sole” Belgian Problem?”
 Request for funding of research project**

Dear Director-General Evans,

According to the most recent ICES and STECF advice, the stock of sole in the Irish Sea (ICES area VIIa) is a stock in very poor condition as are several other stocks in that area. This has resulted in a steep decrease with 53 % of the TAC for this year. Due to the invocation of the Hague Preferences, the quota share for Belgium even decreased with 73 % to only 36 tones in 2013.

The biggest problem however is that the scientific advice conflicts with the perception of Belgian fishermen as landings per unit of effort are continuously increasing. The sole catch represents half of the value of the landings of the Belgian fleet for all areas. The activities of a very small part of the Belgian fleet in the Irish Sea (only ca 20 vessels) represent 7 % of the total value of our fleet. Belgian vessels cannot fish economically in the Irish Sea without catching sole.

The actual situation is of great concern to the Belgian fisheries sector and authorities and it was decided to set up an action plan for sole in the Irish Sea in full collaboration between fishermen and scientists. The ultimate aim is to restore the stock to MSY-levels within a reasonable time and to secure a sustainable demersal fishery by the Belgian fleet in the Irish Sea but also to work together in a regional approach to research and solve the many problems with other stocks (cod, whiting, haddock, etc). Therefore we want to perform a pragmatic research project that can lead to a stakeholder-lead multi-annual management plan for mixed demersal fisheries in the area VIIa within an ecosystem and regional approach.

We have prepared a document with a description of the problem and the action plan and a proposal for a research project for which we foresee a working period of 3 years. You can find this document in attachment. We are so free to ask the Commission to consider possibilities for funding this project.

This action plan was also presented to Working Group 4 (Irish Sea) of the NWWRAC during their meeting on January 30th 2013 in Paris. At their meeting on April 17th in Bilbao a state of play was submitted. We hereby add both PPT-presentations.

At the Executive Committee on January 31st 2013, the NWWRAC decided to include the Irish Sea sole-stock to her letter asking the Commission for an audit for cod in the same area and to link several problems in the Irish Sea. This letter is in preparation at this moment.

We also see a link to the Lot 1-project under Call for tenders No MARE/2012/22 lead by Norman Graham, aiming to develop a multi-annual management plan for mixed demersal fisheries within a defined area of the Celtic Sea using an ecosystem approach. ILVO has signed in for the joint tender for this project and we hope we can learn a lot about the way to handle the project for the Irish Sea.

We are still working on the timeframe and budget for this project which we will send to you as soon as possible. Of course, we are ready to provide all necessary information and to communicate and discuss this project with your services.

Thank you in advance for considering the financial support for this project.

Yours sincerely,

Hans Polet
Scientific director

In attachment:

- Project proposal: "The Irish Sea Sole-Stock: A "Sole" Belgian problem?"
- PPT-presentation for the NWWRAC – WG4 on 30 January 2013, Paris
- PPT-presentation/state of play for the NWWRAC – WG4 on 17 April 2013, Bilbao