



REPORT

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

Focus Group Meeting

on Irish Sea Fisheries Management Issues

AFBI HQ Newforge, Belfast

30th September 2009 - 10.00-16.30 h

Chairman: Lorcan O’Cinnéide

Co-rapporteurs: Barrie Deas and Alan McCulla

Welcome - Chairman’s Introduction

The Chairman welcomed the participants. These spanned the range of Irish Sea fisheries interests from the fishing industry to fisheries scientists, member state administrations and other stakeholders. The Commission representative was especially welcome as it underscored the significance placed on the Irish Sea. This had not always been present.

The meeting was reminded that the Irish Sea fisheries were subject to shared jurisdiction and embraced a range of methods and targeted and by-catch fisheries making management a complex and challenging task.

The Chairman suggested that here was an assumption underpinning the meeting which was that the shared objective of fisheries management was the commercial exploitation of a sustainable resource.

The state of the cod stock in the Irish Sea had been a matter of serious concern since the late 1990s. Although there was a divergence in views of the size of the available biomass, there was agreement that the many measures put in place since 2000 had not resulted in the beginnings of recovery witnessed in the North Sea.



The main response to the cod recovery measures had been a huge diversion of effort from the whitefish fishery into the nephrops fishery. This fishery had been substantially caught by the provisions of the cod recovery plan by virtue of its by-catch.

The most recent measures introduced had been the provisions of a revised cod recovery plan, which had required a 25% reduction in effort and TAC in its first year of application, with further reductions of similar scale if no, or insufficient, response was seen in the biomass of spawning cod.

Against this background, the Chairman spelt out the objectives of the meeting:

1. To come to a clearer understanding of the different perspectives on Irish Sea fisheries management and cod recovery in particular
2. To provide a forum for dialogue with the aim of dispelling misunderstandings and obtaining greater clarity
3. To begin a process of engagement from which the best ideas on a viable strategy for the Irish Sea could emerge, based on the common objective of securing economically and environmentally sustainable fisheries in the Irish Sea

Perspectives on the Irish Sea

A series of presentations were provided to lay down a foundation of common understanding for the work of the group later in the day.

Kenneth Patterson, DG Mare, European Commission

Key points:

- Irish Sea fisheries have been a relatively neglected area
- From the year 2000 ICES advice on Irish Sea cod had been that fisheries managers should ensure the lowest possible fishing mortality
- The Irish Sea had been a test case for the Commission in the introduction of selectivity measures after discussions with stakeholders
- Landings had been maintained at a high level through the 1990s but as fishing mortality had been at a very high level this was unsustainable. It was not a surprise therefore that the stock became depleted.
- Subsequently, a series of cumulative measures were introduced by the Council of Ministers:
 - technical measures
 - seasonal spawning period closure
 - TAC constraints
 - Effort control
- A new cod recovery plan had been adopted by the Council at the end of 2008, with 2009 as its first year of application. As well as 25% reductions in effort and TAC in the first (and possibly successive years) it included a default clause that required a 25% reduction also when there was insufficient data to determine the state of the stock with confidence.
- F was currently in the region of F1.00 whereas the interim objective was in the region of F0.4. This was not MSY but it was moving in the right direction.
- It was the Commission's view that the Irish Sea required a broad fisheries plan that dealt with by-catch fisheries and diversion of effort.
- The Commission was puzzled that more had not been made of the EFF to reduce capacity, thereby leaving the rest of the fleet more profitable.



Norman Graham - Marine Institute

Key Points:

- There has been a decline in the spawning stock biomass of Irish Sea cod.
- When the stock is small, the out-take of relatively small amounts can back a significant difference to the prospects of recovery.
- The fishery has suffered from low levels of recruitment in recent years.
- Haddock stocks in the Irish Sea tell a different story from cod and are at a reasonably healthy level.
- Whiting has seen a massive reduction in landings from 12,000 tonnes to a few hundred.
- Plaice stocks are abundant whilst sole are depleted.
- Assessments make very little use of commercial data because this was not reliable for a number of years.
- Assessments are heavily dependent on survey data.
- It is highly desirable to find a way to reintroduce catch data into the assessments.
- Cooperation between scientists and the fishing industry has started and should be built on to improve the quality of assessments although it is important to recognise that more precise assessments do not lead automatically or inevitably to a better prognosis.
- More fisheries based management is required: for example in identifying measures that would help to avoid unwanted cod catch.
- Discard reduction should be a priority.
- It was important to develop a convergence in understanding the fisheries as the basis for a future long term fisheries plan.



Pieter-Jan Schön, AFBI

Key Points:

- Key developments in 2009 in the use of UWTV surveys for assessment and advice
 - FU specific bias correction factors estimated – surveys used as absolute indices of abundance.
 - Revision of UWTV selectivity (previously assumed similar to fishery) required revision of sustainable harvest rate.
 - Scaling issue, not change in exploitation rate.

- ICES advice for 2010 based on $F_{0.1}$, which had large implications for catch advice.
- Need to identify scientifically defensible long term F target rather than assuming $F_{0.1}$ is appropriate.
- Level of fishing mortality target will depend on level of acceptable risk.
- Key issues to consider in terms of long term management and affect decisions of acceptable risk levels:
 - *Nephrops* stocks not as stable as previously perceived.
 - ICES advice management by Functional Unit to ensure catch opportunities and effort are in line with scale of resource at individual stock level.
 - Effort should also be in line with stock levels in Mixed fishery with very low F targets for cod and whiting.
 - Appropriate sustainable harvest rate and level of risk FU specific?

- The injunction to manage *Nephrops* stocks at the level of functional unit carried significant implications.



Dominic Rihan - Bord Iascaigh Mhara

Key Points:

- Gear options for nephrops fisheries that could help vessels meet the 1.5% exemption threshold in the new cod recovery plan were outlined following a series of vessel trials.
- A number of different parameters were tested:
 - Economic impact
 - Practicality
 - Exclusion of cod from the catch
 - Loss of target species
- Grids, inclined separators and square mesh panels were tested.
- The grid was effective at meeting the 1.5% threshold but was associated with a 30% loss in the value of the catch.
- The separator secured cod by-catch of 3.7% but as associated with a 28% loss in value of catch.
- The square mesh panel was less effective in reducing cod by-catch but was associated with a 12% reduction in value of catch.
- Conclusions: The grid and separator provided immediate solutions to meeting the exemption threshold but represented a significant loss in earnings.
- Major issues remained in relation to STECF's guidelines and the burden of proof



Rory Crawford - Birdlife International

The progress made in the North Sea towards an effective system of real time closures was outlined. Although this was considered aspirational in terms of the Irish Sea, and the restricted area posed specific challenges it was considered important to keep in mind this important initiative as the Irish Sea develops its own strategy.

Barrie Deas - National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations

Key Points:

- Industry frustration at series of failed measures in the Irish Sea
- Cod Symposium in 2005 had suggested a “cod audit” for the Irish Sea as a basis for moving to a realistic and effective management regime: this was a missed opportunity which we were now addressing
- Industry scepticism whether effort control can deliver sustainable fisheries. Effort control was recently abandoned in the New England ground fish fishery after it was deemed to *increase* the intensity of fishing
- Important to incorporate the economic dimension into any management measures
- Scientists, fishermen and fisheries managers have a common interest in developing a robust and shared view of the stocks. This would be an important *platform* for agreed management measures

Round Table

A first round of comments on the presentations was made. These highlighted:

- The scale of the reduction in the whitefish fleet in the Irish Sea.
- The economic pressures generated by the cod recovery measures.
- The need to strengthen the scientific assessments.
- The need to base a new approach based on mutual trust and confidence.
- The need to take build a better understanding of the role of natural mortality and in particular seal predation.
- The Commission welcomed the initiative of bringing fishers, scientists and managers together but noted that the professional competences of each sector should be respected, and that it would be difficult to redress the situation of the Irish Sea fisheries and concrete actions would be needed beyond consultation meetings.
- The need to build an alternative approach within the context of CFP reform which according to the Commission's Green paper would offer greater opportunities for initiatives at regional level and a transfer of responsibilities to industry organisations.

Closing - Michelle Gildernew - Minister For Fisheries Northern Ireland

The Minister welcomed this important initiative and underlined the importance of fisheries to coastal communities and the economic prosperity of the member states with fishing opportunities in the Irish Sea.

The objective of sustainable, profitable and self-reliant fisheries was an important one and particular attention was drawn to the significance of the Irish Sea nephrops fisheries.

The difficulties of negotiating a satisfactory approach within the Council of Ministers process were stressed.

Meeting was adjourned at 16.30 h

ANNEX I. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

NWWRAC FOCUS GROUP MEETING ON IRISH SEA MANAGEMENT			
BELFAST, 30th of SEPTEMBER 2009			
NAME	ORGANISATION	COUNTRY	STATUS
MEMBERS			
Lorcan O’Cinnéide	IFPO	IRELAND	Focus Group Chairman
Barrie Deas	NFFO	UK	NWWRAC representative – co-rapporteur
Alan McCulla	ANIFPO	N. IRELAND UK	NWWRAC representative – co-rapporteur
Luc Corbisier	SDVPO	BELGIUM	NWWRAC representative
Joe Maddock	IFO	IRELAND	NWWRAC representative
John Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary	IRELAND	NWWRAC representative
John Crudden	European Anglers Alliance	IRELAND – EU	NWWRAC representative
Rory Crawford	RSPB - Birdlife	SCOTLAND - UK	NWWRAC representative
Brendan Price	Irish Seal Sanctuary	IRELAND	NWWRAC member

Kenneth Patterson	DG MARE	EU	European Commission
Conor Nolan	BIM	IRELAND	NWWRAC Secretariat
Kristel Adriaenssens	NWWRAC	EU	NWWRAC Secretariat
SCIENTIFIC EXPERTS & MEMBER STATES REPRESENTATIVES			
Norman Graham	Marine Institute	IRELAND	Scientific expert
Colm Lordan	Marine Institute	IRELAND	Scientific expert
Dominic Rihan	BIM	IRELAND	Scientific expert
Pieter-Jan Schon	AFBI	N. IRELAND- UK	Scientific expert
Walter Crouzier	AFBI	N. IRELAND- UK	Scientific expert
Michelle Gildernew	DARDNI	N IRELAND	Member State Representative
Maria Holohan	DAFF	IRELAND	Member State Representative
Andy Read	Isle of Man Department	ISLE OF MAN - UK	Member State Representative
Gurpreet P.	DEFRA	UK	MS Representative

OBSERVERS			
Karin Dubsky	Coastwatch Europe	EU	Observer
David Kinwan	IFPO	IRELAND	Observer
Davy Hill	NFFO	UK	Observer
John Cassidy	ANIFPO	N. IRELAND	Observer
Julie Staines	Irish Seal Sanctuary	IRELAND	Observer
John Daly	Irish Seal Sanctuary	IRELAND	Observer
Sonia Mounoy	Irish Seal Sanctuary	IRELAND	Observer
Dick James	NIFPO	UK	Observer
Trevor McKee	NIFPO	UK	Observer
Samuel W.	NIFPO	UK	Observer
Robert Gracey	R. J. Gracey	N. IRELAND -UK	Observer