



MINUTES

North Western Waters RAC

Focus group for Cod Recovery Plan

BIM, Dublin, 22nd of March 2012

Chairman: Sean O'Donoghue

Rapporteur: Caroline Gamblin

1. Welcome

- Attendees and apologies:

The chairman of the focus group, Sean O'Donoghue, welcomed all the participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from the following people:

The full list of attendees and represented organisations are included in annex 1.

- Agenda for the meeting: The agenda for the meeting was approved.
- Minutes of the last meeting: The minutes of the last meeting of the focus group on the 27th of October 2011 were approved.

2. Outcome of the technical meeting on the improvement of the implementation of the Cod Plan (EC regulation n° 1342/2008) organised by the Commission on the 20th of March 2012

The European Commission (EC) organised a meeting on the 20th of March with the Member States (MS) and representatives of the North Western Waters RAC (NWW RAC) and the North Sea RAC to discuss improvements that could be made, in the short term, to the Cod Plan pending its review.

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Indeed, the Commission considers that the implementation of a multi-species plan could take time and that, given the assessment of the plan carried out by STECF, and the different observations also received by the MS or the RACs, improvements to the plan may be introduced in the short term. The RAC was represented at this meeting by Barrie Deas, Sean O'Donoghue and Caroline Gamblin.

During the meeting, STECF presented the results of the July 2011 assessment of the Cod Plan as well as the next milestones: Rostock in March for the North Sea/Eastern Channel, and Edinburgh for the North Sea/Eastern Channel impact assessment and the follow up from the “*scoping meeting*” for West of Scotland and the Irish Sea.

The Member States in turn to comment and the opinion of the RACs was recorded. Globally, the majority of the observations were in relation to the effort regime. It was interesting to see that the MS and the RACs often express similar positions, in particular in relation to annual reductions in effort (article 12) or automatic TAC reductions (article 9). Particular emphasis was also placed on Articles 11 and 13.

The afternoon of the meeting was dedicated to a practical discussion of the improvements that could be brought to articles 9, 11, 12, 13 and 14.

The chairman, SOD, proposed that the proposals and conclusions be taken in item 3 of the agenda, article by article, to update the RAC position.

The EC concluded the meeting on the 20th of March by indicating its desire to propose a regulation to propose short-term modifications to the plan. This regulation should be discussed in co-decision (which would take at least 6 months).

3. Assessment of the “benchmark” meetings in relation to West of Scotland Cod and Irish Sea Cod – ICES WKROUND (Aberdeen, 22nd-29th of February)

Colm Lordan summarised the main discussions that took place during the cod benchmark meetings in February last:

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3.1.1. West of Scotland Cod:

The main difficulties in relation to the stock are: stock structure, uncertainties in relation to landings (improvement since 2006) and discards (with major modifications to the operating diagram since 2007), the taking into account of the significance of predation and the modification of the Scottish scientific survey in 2011, that was used to “tune” the model.

In relation to stock structure, even if scientists consider that two sub-populations exist (genetic difference between a Northern population and a Southern population that is considered to be a priority for recovery), these are assessed simultaneously. Discussions took place in relation to the possibility of integrating the catches of the “North” sub-population in the North Sea stock but without any proposal being made.

In relation to catches/discards, the scientists decided to reintroduce catches into the model, in the absence of scientific surveys. The scientists produced an assessment based on age.

In relation to seals: their population is considered as stable following an exponential increase during the 1980s. The scientists also compared the results of stock assessment, with or without including seal predation. There is little difference and it does not change the general impression of the stock trends. However, it was noted that the data on seals remains sparse with little data points, and it was considered that its inclusion could skew any result.

The scientists chose to use an American model based on size that allows the vulnerability of younger individuals to be taken into account, in the place of an historical estimated value of M of 0.2.

The assessment results are quite similar to last year with quite a weak stock. The bulk of catches are juveniles (no traces of large individuals). There are no changes in relation to the reference points.

Fishermen are quite disappointed with the conclusions of the benchmark meeting.

SOD stated that no professional would believe that the seal population is not increasing. COL replied that he did not know how the estimates were produced.



3.1.2. Irish Sea:

The situation in the Irish Sea is fairly similar.

In relation to stock structure, the data from marking indicates that the stock is quite settled and affiliated with the Irish Sea.

All the available data was studied separately during the benchmark meeting in order to see the indications provided by the different sources in relation to the status of the stock. The results are similar to previous assessments: high total mortality, mainly due to fishing, low increase in stock size, catches mostly comprised of juveniles, etc.

The Irish representatives observed that fishermen report catches of large fish at sea. Currently, this information does not appear in the scientific data. Therefore, there is currently a difference in perception of the status of the stock between the industry and scientists. Barrie Deas asked if this could be due to a difference in the distribution in the water column. The fact is that the métiers in the Irish Sea are mostly semi-pelagic. In effect, scientists observed a different structure of catches during the Q1 and Q4 scientific surveys.

Clearly, it would appear that certain age classes are not found in catches. For the moment, this issue has not been resolved by scientists (even by working on the catchability of the biggest fish).

The eventual environment factors were not discussed during the benchmark meeting.

3.1.3. Celtic Sea

Mr Lordan gave an update on this stock, at the request of the chairman, even though it does not come under this working group as this information was of interest to the attendees at the meeting.

The results obtained by using different models are very similar to last year. The 2009 age group dominates and the 2010 age group is also strong. The reference points were not modified. A reduction in fishing mortality has been observed over these last years.



3.2. Lack of data and improvement of the situation

Scottish fishermen set up an observation programme in area VI in accordance with the protocol used by Marine Scotland. Nevertheless, the latter has not yet used the data collected. Fishermen wonder if it would be interesting to also put into place self-sampling by fishermen in as it is done in the Celtic Sea.

Action point 1: Reinforce the message to Marine Scotland in relation to the benefit of taking into consideration the data collected by the observation programme initiated by Scottish fishermen.

Discussion then followed in relation to discards and the fact that few fishermen currently fill in the “logbooks” accurately. It would be useful if scientists could obtain discard data that is representative of practice. For fishermen, the threat of a blunt policy in relation to discards gives rise to a certain level of distrust.

It is a vicious circle. It will nevertheless become necessary to break away from this system and to link assessments based on accurate data and the development of management measures in accord with the situation encountered by fishermen in the field.

Action point 2: Barrie Deas will draft a paragraph on the need to deal with this issue of having an integrated process between the assessment process and management.

Action point 3: Norman Graham will propose a note on the importance of discard data based on surveys.

4. Review of the NWW RAC position document on the Cod Plan (EC Reg. 1342/2008)

The chairman proposed, in the first instance, a discussion on the measures that could be proposed in the short term based on the discussions that took place during the meeting of the 20th of March in Brussels.



The following articles of the plan were discussed:

Article 9: During the meeting of the 20th of March, the MS and the RACs expressed the need to delete this article, which proposes an automatic TAC reduction of 25% when the CSTEP recommends that cod catches be reduced to the lowest level possible, even if more appropriate alternative measures could be envisaged. The issue is even more relevant in the West of Scotland where the TAC is set at 0.

Article 11: The idea of having a more specific and transparent protocol for constituting and assessing files was expressed during the meeting of the 11th. It is important that exemptions can be granted to single vessels and not only to a group of vessels. Finally, the time limit for studying files are too long. The proposal according to which the exemptions obtained by a Member State (relating to gear and a geographical area) could be automatically granted to vessels meeting the same criteria, appears to be appropriate in this sense and should be implemented.

Article 12: Reductions in effort are implemented annually (in association with the reduction in F required to achieve the objective of 0.4) through this article. This measure has a very significant impact on fleets. The MS have declared that they are in favour of freezing effort at 2012 levels; advice shared by the RAC.

Article 13: Article 13 presents difficulties in interpretation (in particular article 13 (b) on the definition of a fishing trip, or article 13 (c) on the quantity of effort that can be recovered. Clarification and simplification of the implementation of this article is required. Article 13 (a) appears to be pointless (redundant in light of the possibility proposed in article 11 (b)).

Finally, one of the difficulties of the plan lies with the lack of flexibility between effort groups. Currently, the transfer of effort between TR2 and TR1 gear is systematically penalised. It is advisable to make arrangements so that vessels, that wish to increase mesh size in order to improve selectivity and limit discards, are not penalised.

Action point 4: Caroline Gamblin will rapidly summarise the different proposals for interim measures in relation to these 5 articles in a position document. The document will then be circulated among focus group members, the members of working groups 1, 3 and 4 and the Executive Committee for approval by written procedure before the 5th of April.

The focus group members then reviewed the position document from last June.

The paragraphs that require changes are as follows:

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5. In the introduction: place the emphasis on the necessity to integrate the work of the ICES benchmark meeting during discussions on the management plan;
6. General issues:
 - **Action point 5: Colm Lordan will update the § on natural mortality M in relation to the discussions that took place during the benchmark meeting, as well as § 3.2;**
 - §3.3: indicate that this should be part of the interim measures;
 - §3.5: update in relation to the discussions on the interim measures;
 - §3.6: add the difficulty posed by penalising the transfer of effort towards larger mesh sizes (from TR2 to TR1);
 - §3.7: rewrite the § in the knowledge that the draft regulation has been published since;
7. Part in area VIa
 - Update point 4.1;
 - Update graphics;
 - Remove articles 4.3, 4.4 (points already covered in the general observations);
 - Update point 4.5 (haddock was removed from catch composition rules but difficulties have been encountered with haddock).
8. Part VIIa
 - No changes;
9. Part VIId
 - Update to introduce the necessity of not penalising transfers of effort between TR2 and TR1 when selectivity is being improved;
 - Reiterate the characteristics of area VIId, which should be taken into account in discussions on the assessment of the impact of a North Sea management plan (same stock of cod, but different fisheries).

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Action point 6: Update the RAC position document

The chairman highlighted that the document on interim measures is the most urgent document and that the modifications to the position document can be made over a longer period.

10. Summary of action points

- Action point 1: Reinforce the message to Marine Scotland in relation to the benefit of taking into consideration the data collected by the observation programme initiated by Scottish fishermen.
- Action point 2: Barrie Deas will draft a paragraph on the need to deal with this issue of having an integrated process between the assessment process and management.
- Action point 3: Norman Graham will propose a note on the importance of discard data based on surveys.
- Action point 4: Caroline Gamblin will rapidly summarise the different proposals for interim measures in relation to the main articles of the plan in a position document.
- Action point 5: Colm Lordan will update the § on natural mortality M in relation to the discussions that took place during the benchmark meeting, as well as § 3.2.
- Action point 6: Update the RAC position document.

The position document on interim measures will be sent to the members of the focus group, working groups and the Executive Committee, by Wednesday the 28th of March at the latest, so that it can be forwarded to the EC, if possible, before Easter week (6th of April).

Closing

The chairman of the meeting closed the meeting and thanked the attendees.

The meeting was adjourned at 5pm

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Annex I. List of participants

NWWWRAC Focus Group Review of Cod Recovery Plan

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Chairman

Sean O'Donoghue

Rapporteur

Caroline Gamblin

Focus Group Members present

Kenny Coull

Mike Park

Emiel Brouckaert

Alan McCulla

Barrie Deas

Francis O'Donnell

Eibhlín O'Sullivan

Observers

Robert Griffin (DG MARE)

Norman Graham (STECF)

Sarah Kraak (STECF)

Colm Lordan (Marine Institute)

Alexandre Rodríguez (NWWWRAC Secretariat)

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