



## North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

### REPORT

#### **Focus Group – Mixed Fisheries Management Plan for the Irish Sea (VIIa) The Royal Marine Hotel - Dun Laoghaire, Dublin Friday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2013**

Chairman: Alan McCulla  
Rapporteur: John Crudden

#### **1. Welcome by the Chairman**

The Chairman, Alan McCulla, opened the meeting at 11:00 and welcomed all attendees.

- Opening statement: Michael Keatinge (BIM-NWWRAC Director) said that looking out over the Irish Sea we need to be aware that time is no longer on the fishermen's side. The CFP reform process is not as ambitious as expected and we need to take action to guarantee the economic continuity of the concerned fleets. The message for today's meeting is that progress needs to be done as soon as possible because events may pass us by very quickly.
- Introductions: The participants at the meeting made brief statements of introduction. The list of participants is set out in Annex 1
- Apologies: Apologies were received from Emiel Brouckaert (Rederscentrale - Belgium).
- Adoption of the agenda: The agenda as circulated was adopted without change.
- Adoption of the report from the last meeting: The report from the last FG meeting of 5<sup>th</sup> July 2012 was deemed as adopted as no objections were raised.
- Setting the scene: objectives of the meeting: Alan McCulla said that he concurred with the opening statement made by Michael Keatinge. This meeting was very timely given the release last week of the Commission's Communication on Fishing Opportunities for 2014 and the mention made expressing concerns in relation to two main stocks in the Irish Sea, Cod and Sole. He reminded the meeting that it's been approximately 10 years since the industry and the NWWRAC have first called for an audit of the Irish Sea.



A discussion document has been produced for the meeting by the Secretariat in conjunction with the Chairman which sets out the current state of play and the challenges for the future. The document circulated by the secretariat sets the agenda for today's meeting very well. It contains a four-point plan that needs to be addressed, which were originally proposed by Dr. Norman Graham at the previous NWWRAC Focus Group meeting on the Irish Sea held in Dublin in July 2012. This four-point plan should be a guide for future actions in the Irish Sea. Ongoing discussions are taking place between DEFRA, NFFO and ANIFPO on reviewing and rethinking fisheries/science partnership projects in the UK using commercial trawl surveys. We need to look and see if the NWWRAC plan will fit into this initiative.

### Comments from the floor

Sean O'Donoghue said that we had got down to the "*nuts and bolts*" at a meeting last year. The key issue remains the same, unknown fishing mortality. ICES has gone as far as it could which is not very satisfactory.

There needs to be an agreed action plan with fixed timeline to solve the mortality issues for the Irish Sea. It is important for this Focus Group that everyone has a common understanding between all parties, including scientists, stakeholders and managers and this should be included expressly under item 1 (main purpose) of the discussion paper.

Sean O'Donoghue made the suggestion that we might need to leave ICES out of the equation and concentrate on STECF for a solution.

Alan McCulla reminded the meeting that there is a big disparity between fishermen and scientists (ICES) perception of the state of the stock. There is an STECF assessment report for the Irish Sea since 2007. No plan will succeed unless it has the support of all the stakeholders involved.

Sean O'Donoghue said we need to add the mortality issue to the list produced by Norman Graham.

Alan McCulla reminded the meeting that there is a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between the Commission and ICES and the one's this year includes a request to consider all reasons for unaccounted fishing mortality in the Irish Sea.



## 2. Key issues with the science on Irish Sea Stocks

Alessandro Ligas (AFBINI) presented the preliminary outcomes of ICES WGCSE held in Copenhagen in May 2013. He put in context the current assessment with a mixed fisheries approach. As a first step, any mixed fisheries system needs to be delimited in terms of number of stocks exploited and number of fisheries involved in this joint and simultaneous exploitation. In this context, the traditional single species stock assessment could still provide some significant input.

### State of the stocks – scientific assessment

- Sole – SSB has been declining since 2001 and is below reference points. The advice is for no directed fishery and to minimize discards and by-catch.
- Plaice – Biomass increasing by 1.4% higher than the mean of the last three years. The advice for 2014 is for a catch of 1,802 tonnes.
- Nephrops FU15 – The stock is stable and above the reference points.
- Haddock – The stock is in a poor state. The advice is for no more than 1,000 tonnes in catches.
- Whiting – The stock is in a poor state. Catches in the region of 1,000 tonnes 95% of which were discarded as being below MLS.
- Cod – The advice is: no directed fishery, minimise by-catch and discards. The SSB has decreased 10 fold since 1980's. Total mortality remains very high.

### Mixed fisheries approach to a management plan.

On the best available knowledge cod will drive the agenda in the Irish Sea in relation to MSY approach for all species. The main issue is how to avoid catching cod. If we want to reduce the fishing mortality we need to focus on a clear spatial and temporal window (technical measures). To avoid cod we should look at avoidance measures. This is going to affect the nephrops fishery. The use of selectivity devices since the implementation of the Cod Management Plan showed a reduction of 30% of by-catch in the nephrops fishery.



## Data deficiencies

The quantity and quality of commercial landing data is deteriorating due to reduction in TAC since the 1990's. ICES has tried to overcome this problem by sampling estimates from three large commercial ports. ICES has been unable to estimate the effects of environmental variables. Discard data covers a very narrow time series only since 2003.

The problem is that the data quality will continue to deteriorate further due to reduction of TAC's and further improvement in gear selectivity; in addition, the introduction of the discard ban could represent a further reduction in data availability, as it is aimed at encouraging fishermen to reduce discard rates also.

Possible solutions to the problem is to:

- Improve both the scientific surveys and the fisheries/science partnerships;
- Investigate environmental variables for unaccounted mortality issues;
- Maximise the collaboration between research, fishing industry and stakeholders.

## Comments from the floor

Luc Corbisier said that science needs time series to work with. As we only have good discards data since 2003 at earliest could it extrapolated backwards?

Alessandro Ligas replied that ICES had tried to do that but the problem was fishing patterns have changed with made it difficult to estimate discard rates.

Michael Keatinge said that we are probably past the stage of discussing the mortality issue. The fishing industry needs to look at removing itself from these fisheries. Introducing better selectivity should be considered.

Johnny Woodlock said that areas closed to trawling may also need to be considered as technical measures have been in use for over 20 years but still the problems with by-catch and dead juvenile fish continues.

Alan McCulla said that the issues with the grids are well documented. He asked if there a shift in the ICES advice this year. We have to be mindful that the presentation we have just received from Alessandro Ligas reflects only the preliminary conclusions from the ICES WGCSE and is not yet the ICES advice.

Sean O'Donoghue made the point that the extra work being done by ILVO should have been taken account of by ICES for the Sole stock.



Alessandro Ligas said that fish aggregating behavior could explain the different perceptions that industry and science has in relation to stock abundance. In the discussions at the ICES WGCSE they tried to find some solution to unaccounted mortality issue. The only solution they could come up with was to propose the activation of a tagging programme.

Barrie Deas said that it was frustrating that the cod audit was already raised at the Joint NSRAC-NWWRAC Cod Symposium in 2006 and we are still calling for it. A lot has changed in the interim with fisheries/science partnerships and a lot of preparatory work in the RAC's has been done. We are in a better position now except for unaccounted mortality. Mr. Deas suggested aligning the incentives for industry at vessel level with the management objectives. We should also explore increasing the TAC in exchange for more selectivity.

John Crudden asked if recreational catches whether from anglers or recreational fishers had a bearing on unaccounted mortality or were considered at the WGCSE meeting. He pointed out that there is a specific group in ICES dealing with recreational catches.

Alessandro Ligas replied that recreational catches may have a bearing but were not taken into consideration at the WGCSE meeting.

Ian Humes (DARDNI) made the point that selectivity solutions should be left to the industry to solve. The landing of all catches will have the effect of creating an incentive to make it work.

Michael Keatinge asked if there was any other explanation for fishing mortality. This issue needs to be solved however painful it will be in the process.

Sean O'Donoghue asked where does this leave cod recovery which is the key focus for the Commission. He does not believe that a tagging programme is the best solution.

### **3. Commission's views**

Roy Griffin (DG MARE) said that there had been limited progress and waiting on the response from ICES to the special request. Given the current assessment it is unlikely that TACs are going to change dramatically in the foreseeable future. Tagging studies will take around 3-5 years to provide some evidence. The Commission does not envisage an evaluation of the current cod management plan in the near future. Instead, the emphasis will be put on multispecies / mixed fishery management plans delivered and developed through a regional approach, in line with the direction of the CFP reform. Technical issues can also be addressed in the management plans.



Alan McCulla said that it was painful to hear that there would be no further evaluation of the current cod management plan. This effectively means that it will be replaced with a spatial plan. A lot of problems with the science persist.

Roy Griffin replied that the precautionary approach is the bottom line if we cannot provide scientific evidence.

Ian Humes suggested we need a plan that addressed the Nephrops fishery but is at the same time consistent with conservation objectives.

Roy Griffin said that any such plan will have to be sustainable in terms of conservation.

Sean O'Donoghue said that the objectives for a Mixed Fishery Management Plan are not a problem but we need precise economic, biological and social details. The experience from the Celtic Sea set out very clear objectives. All we need to do is to adjust them to suit the Irish Sea.

Alan McCulla said that if we can agree these they form the basis for a project but needs a push from the Member States involved.

#### **4. Towards an ecosystem based approach to fisheries management: collaboration between science and industry**

##### Update on the Northern Irish industry-led project proposal developed for ANIFPO

Alan McCulla gave a brief update on this project. It is parked for the time being because of the problems being raised at this meeting.

##### Update on the Belgian fisheries-science partnership for management of Irish Sea Sole

Hilde Vanhaecke said that she had not much to add since the NWWRAC meeting in Bilbao. The proposal has been sent to the Commission on 30<sup>th</sup> April and a response is awaited. She reminded that this project was the result of the cooperation of Belgian fishermen and scientists to collect data and information on sole stock and that also for this initiative support of the NWWRAC has been sought.

Six observer trips have been undertaken so far this year. 60 % of the Belgian quota on sole has been taken up which creates a problem for data collection in the autumn. It is too soon to analyse the data. The problem is that there is need for additional resources (i.e. money, people and time) to do it. Initial estimates give a CPUE for February 2013 with the same value as last year and with a higher estimate than ICES evaluation.



The science says that the problem of the difference perception is because of aggregations of the stock. Another benchmark of the stock by ICES will take place in 2015 but that may be too late.

## **5. Open discussion: Industry and NGO perspectives on Cod Recovery and Irish Sea management**

### Cod audit and unknown fisheries mortality

Barrie Deas asked what benefit a tagging programme would provide.

Alessandro Ligas replied that a tagging study would help to explain migration routes of stocks, if there are interactions between species and address the unaccounted mortality issue. So far the science is not able to explain where the adult cod are in the Irish Sea. The cod population seems to be composed of almost all young individuals aged between 2-3 years.

Alan McCulla made the point that a fisheries/science partnership sentinel fishery undertaken last autumn showed that there are older cod too.

Alessandro Ligas replied that the sentinel fishery provided the same results as those provided by the UK fisheries/science partnership survey. The age structure of Irish Sea cod population is still mostly composed by young individuals (mainly 2-3 years old). Mortality remains high which cannot be explained by decreasing fishing effort. He urged all stakeholders to collaborate to solve the problem.

Barrie Deas said we needed to draft a checklist of reasons for unaccounted mortality. This will create the momentum to try to address the problem.

### Analysis and development of a Mixed Fisheries Management Plan

A hard copy of the framework and objectives of a proposal by the NWWRAC for a Mixed Fisheries Management Plan for part of the Celtic Sea was circulated to the participants to use as a template in the development of a similar plan for the Irish Sea.

Sean O'Donoghue delivered a summary of the document.

Michael Keatinge asked the meeting to consider placing the focus on fleets rather than the stocks. The industry needed to be provided with certain economic strategies to ensure their survivability.



Barrie Deas said that fleets in the Irish Sea were now highly dependent on one species – nephrops. Industry needed a degree of flexibility.

*A lengthy discussion took place on who will do the drafting of the management plan, the size and duration of the project and where the funding will come from.*

Alan McCulla asked the representatives of the Commission and the Member States present for their opinion on the feasibility of the plan under consideration.

Andrew Randall (DEFRA – UK) said that provided that the proposal is scientifically robust and the funding available the route being proposed is the way to go.

Ian Humes (DARD Northern Ireland) said should the proposal be done within the new regionalisation structure he would agree it was the right approach. AFBI has already identified some lines of work on interactions between species, which the NWWRAC could support.

Sean Murray (DAFF Ireland) regarded this as a logical concept if tied into regionalisation.

Roy Griffin (DG MARE) said that the Commission was happy with the way they were progressing.

Michael Keatinge gave a broad outline of the requirements needed for the project:

- We would need one office-based person to draw the whole project together;
- We could start off with a small project;
- We could then select the options that are worth doing.
- A budget of 100,000 euro could give us a person to do this. Funding could be drawn from the national programmes of the EFF if costs were shared by the Member States involved.
- If work is done quickly, it might be possible to have someone employed by the NWWRAC in January 2014.

**A list of actions with tight timelines associated with this decision is set out in item 6.**

Barrie Deas said that this was a historic moment: the NWWRAC has succeeded to bring together representatives of the European Commission, the coastal Member States with interest in the fishery, key scientists and stakeholders in the one room with one focus. This is a good example of a test case for regionalization.

Michael Keatinge reminded the meeting that a high level Member State group would meet in September. We should focus on getting the project approved at that meeting.





## 6. Actions and timetable

1. The Secretariat will circulate by email the Celtic Sea template establishing a framework and objectives to develop a management plan and will ask for feedback to give it an Irish Sea focus. Based on the comments received, the Secretariat will redraft and circulate a new version to the members of the Focus Group and the scientists for comment.
2. The Focus Group members will submit their comments/responses on the draft to be returned to the Secretariat with deadline 15th July.
3. The Secretariat will circulate the second draft for quick endorsement with deadline 17th July. The agreed paper will be uploaded in the website and tabled as paper for approval at the WG4 meeting in Dublin the 24th of July.
4. Alan McCulla and Michael Keatinge, with the assistance of the Secretariat, will draft a funding application designed to find a project leader to drive the Management Plan for the Irish Sea with deadline 17th July (i.e. 1 week before the WG4 meeting).
5. The Secretariat will write to the Commission asking it to respond to the ICES advice (expected to be released in late June) for Irish Sea cod and demersal stocks either by writing or at the WG4 meeting in Dublin.
6. The Secretariat will write to the Member States involved asking them to consider funding the proposal of a project leader if this is approved by the WG4 and the Executive Committee that will meet in Dublin the 24 of July.
7. An update on the state of play will be given by the relevant members and a discussion of progress-to-date will take place at the Working Group 4 meeting in Dublin on 24th July.

## 7. Close of the meeting

With no other business to discuss the Chairman expressed his thank to the NWWRAC Secretariat for the logistics and preparation of the meeting, Michael Keatinge and BIM for hosting it and the participants for their attendance.

**The meeting was adjourned at 16:00h.**



## **ANNEX I. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

<b>NWWRAC MEMBERS</b>		
<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Surname/s</u></b>	<b><u>Organization</u></b>
Alan	McCulla	ANIFPO – <b>WG4 Chairman</b>
John	Crudden	EAA – <b>WG4 Rapporteur</b>
Luc	Corbisier	Stichting voor Duurzame Visserij
Barrie	Deas	NFFO UK
John	Lynch	Irish Fishermen’s Organisation
Sean	O’Donoghue	Killybegs Fishermen’s Organisation
Caitlín	Uí Aodha	Irish South & East FPO
John	Ward	Irish Fish Producers Organisation
John	Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary

<b>NWWRAC SECRETARIAT</b>		
Alexandre	Rodríguez	Executive Assistant – Policy Officer



<b>EUROPEAN COMMISSION</b>		
Roy	Griffin	DG MARE – Unit J2

<b>MEMBER STATES</b>		
Ian	Humes	DARD – Northern Ireland
Michael	Keatinge	Bord Iascaigh Mhara / RAC Director
Sean	Murray	DAFM – Northern Ireland
Andrew	Randall	DEFRA - UK

<b>SCIENTISTS</b>		
Alessandro	Ligas	AFBINI / ICES
Hilde	Vanhaecke	ILVO Belgium