

NWWRAC Meeting Report from Working Group 3 November 2005



Report to the Executive Committee of the North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council (NWWRAC) of the First Meeting of the English Channel Working Group (WG3)

1. The Working Group met in Paris on Monday 7th November 2005.
2. Pierre Georges Dachicourt, President of the CNPMEM welcomed delegates to Paris and wished all participants fruitful and successful meetings.
3. Sam Lambourn, President of the Executive Committee of the NWWRAC, welcomed delegates and explained that nominees to the WG exceeded the budgeted number and asked for volunteers to become “active observers” so as to reach the desired maximum of 25 without coercion.
4. He issued a warning that the timetable for influencing the November Council was very tight and that the absolute priorities for the meeting today must be to arrive at a draft Opinion on the Commission Proposal for a Council Regulation establishing measures for the recovery of the Sole stock in Western Channel (ICES Division VIIe) for the Executive Committee to adopt and present to the Commission and to give due consideration to the ICES advice on TAC species for the December Council, also to guide the Executive.
5. The Executive Committee is due to meet in Brussels on 22nd November, the same day as the November Council. In order to provide an Opinion on the Commission Proposal in advance of the Council it is necessary for the Executive to invoke written procedures.
6. Sam Lambourn urged people with expertise to come forward with reports and working papers in order to provoke discussions during the 2006 programme of work and in subject-based sub-Working Groups to then feed information into the meetings of the Working Group. It is very important to involve people with knowledge at all levels so as to ensure the Commission takes note of the Opinions derived by the Working Groups and subsequently adopted and promoted by the NWWRAC.
7. The delegates elected Daniel Lefèvre to become for the next 3 years Chairman of the Working Group. As Vice –Chairman they elected Jim Portus. As Rapporteur for the Group and to draft the Opinion they elected Jim Portus.

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8. Daniel Lefèvre expressed his thanks to delegates for electing him. He described the English Channel as an area full of diverse species that supported a range of fishing activities and a number of Ports. It is important that the RAC considers how best to support the fish stocks, including non-TACs that make up around 85% of the economic activity and the communities whose economy depends on those fish. In the future the RAC will be able to make proposals for better fisheries management, but only if the Working Group proves to be effective.
9. Jim Portus also thanked delegates for their support and expressed the view that future discussions might provide a focus on Crabs and Scallops as being essential in the economic picture. For today the discussions had to concentrate on the Cod Recovery Zone as it affects ICES Division VIIId and on the Commission Proposals for Sole in ICES Division VIIe.
10. The Rules of Procedure adopted in Dublin on 30th September were endorsed by the WG.
11. CEFAS scientist Mike Armstrong started his presentation with the ICES advice for VIIe Sole. The observed Biomass was in 2004 the lowest ever. Safe and rapid recovery to Bpa in one year would imply an 80% cut in fishing mortality to F0.1 and a TAC of less than 240 tonnes. This is the advice behind the Commission Proposal for a Recovery Plan. The 2005 TAC of 865 tonnes and the imposition of effort limits provided for a 20% cut from accepted catch levels over recent years. Fishing Mortality now is down from the highest ever 0.49 to 0.45. The ICES Working Group has investigated a number of scenarios to arrive at high long term annual yields in the region of 850 tonnes with low risk of Biomass falling below Blim. Harvest Control Rules (HCRs) are required, but these should be agreed after dialogue between the managers and the stakeholders. This is where the NWWRAC can play a part. It is important to consider at what rate the stock would move to high long term yield. The impact of measures should be cross-checked each year to ensure the target is reached in no more than 10 years. The linked stock of 7e Plaice has also been observed to be in a relatively poor state. Effort limits and HCRs for Sole 7e should be beneficial for Plaice 7e. The impact of the 2005 Annex IVc arrangements has not yet been quantified.
12. The stock of 7d Sole is in a better state than 7e and the advice is for no increase in effort that translates into a TAC in 2006 at the same level as in 2005.
13. French delegates urged caution. Although some stocks are in difficulties others are fished within safe biological limits. Measures including HCRs for one stock should not impact negatively on the economy derived from others. The industry is suffering from unprecedented high fuel prices and there is a real risk of the collapse of the industry. It is desirable to have some stability over time and the measures in Annex IVc for 2005 should be rolled over into 2006 in order to have the time to assess the benefits.

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It was suggested that the Technical Conservation Measures considered but not adopted in 2004 might be revisited during 2006. The 2005 Annex IVc measures lack precision and might be improved by removing from the provisions the netters that use large meshes and catch small amounts of sole. It seems also that the Commission proposals take no account of recent changes in the various fleets. Knowledge of such changes might be provided by a RAC study. Other studies into fisheries biology and fishing grounds might in future provide useful information. For now it is vitally important for good economic reasons that the Commission recovery proposals are not implemented.

14. UK delegates cautioned that the WG should produce an opinion that is based on the scientific advice and not just on the basis of immediate concerns of negative economic impacts. Adopting a long term recovery trajectory will lead in time to higher yields. It is important to have a management plan from now that has a scientific basis from which to build during future meetings of the WG. It must also have industry support. There is otherwise a danger that the Commission recovery proposals will return time and again. There was agreement that netters that catch little or no Sole should not be caught by the Annex IVc limits. It is very important that the WG produces an opinion that stands up to scrutiny and is adopted by written procedures in time by the RAC Executive Committee in time to influence the November Council.
15. The UK Fisheries Department tabled to the WG a management plan for 7e sole that outlined provisions that complied with ICES long term advice. It was tabled in English only but was translated to the delegates in French. (See attached document.
16. It was agreed that the DEFRA proposed management plan provided a good basis for an opinion. However, delegates expressed concerns that the plan implied cuts in the number of available days at sea in 2006 and following years. Some delegates suggested differential rates for the large-scale and the small-scale fleets. There appeared to be no escape from effort reductions if the DEFRA plan was adopted without amendments. Delegates agreed it is very important that recent changes to fleets in Member States are taken fully into account and also any proposed near-future fleet programmes like decommissioning.
17. Mike Armstrong (CEFAS) cautioned that the Commission is unlikely to accept target mortality greater than F0.2 even though the DEFRA paper suggested a range of mortality up to F0.31. The Commission may believe a 10% per annum reduction in fishing mortality too slow. At the very least the Commission would require a scientific evaluation of the likely impacts of a revised target. It might be appropriate to review the scientific study of proposed changes to the Technical Measures done in 2004.
18. It was proposed from the Chairman and accepted by delegates that the DEFRA paper should be used as a template for the Opinion of the RAC, noting the view that Annex IVc should be considered the first year of arrangements in a long term plan leading to F0.31.

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However, because of the social and economic implications of cuts in the TAC and in the number of available days at sea the Commission would be urged to keep for at least a second year the 2005 effort limits. Time is needed to evaluate fully the impacts on the stock to date of the new measures before deepening or widening them. Such impacts must include consideration of restructuring of fleets, whether voluntarily done or by decommissioning, including proposed schemes for the near future. The Commission would be asked to remove from the application of the measures the netters that use large mesh nets and catch little or no Sole. The RAC Executive Committee would be asked to approve the Opinion by written procedures in order to ensure some influence at the November Council.

19. French delegates asked that there should be a proper assessment of the Sole stock based on the Baie de Granville, an area between the Channel Islands and mainland France, where they believe a separate breeding stock exists that has not been taken into consideration by the ICES. IFREMER may be able to help by conducting a tagging programme. It is very important that the RAC, the ICES and the Commission all work with good information. The state of the stock can only be assessed properly with accurate catch quantity and catch rate data, position data and knowledge of the fleets. Perhaps even by extending VMS to the over-10-metre fleet?
20. Concern was expressed that the Commission might ignore the advice of the RAC and the Council might simply vote to agree for VIIe sole the Proposal for a Recovery Plan. The WG agreed with the opinion that future meetings and the survival of the RAC depends on the Commission responding well to the advice of stakeholders.
21. The WG considered also the application of Cod Recovery Zone measures affecting ICES division VIId. The ICES advice for the stock of VIId sole is for a TAC at the same level as in 2005. The WG agreed it is important that the Commission be urged to apply no reductions in time at sea for fishers affected by the CRZ limits, especially those that catch little or no Cod regardless of gear type used. French and Belgian delegates highlighted the anomaly that 7d is considered to be part of the N Sea for Cod assessment, but has been part of Area 7 for management since 1983. In their opinion 7d should not be considered part of the N Sea for the Cod Recovery Zone arrangements. The vessels that target Sole in 7d, a stock with a stable TAC, have a very low by-catch of Cod in that Area so there is no justification for such vessels in that Area to be the subjects of limited days at sea under the CRZ.
22. The WG discussed in detail the work programmes for 2006. ICES Areas VIId and VIIe are the joint areas under consideration. TAC and non-TAC stocks are involved, including scallops, crabs, Sea Bream and Sea Bass.
23. Concerns were expressed about the risks from unmanaged expansion in these unregulated fisheries. It was suggested that E.U. Regulations might be created to protect certain non-TAC stocks from increased pressure.

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Although the implication is that a good biological condition exists for a stock with non-TAC status this should not be assumed.

24. Sea Bass is the subject of stringent regulatory measures. Nursery areas have been protected for many years and there appears to be no adverse ICES advice for the stock. In the UK a ban on pair trawling within the 12 mile limit has been imposed and the UK government is seeking for that ban to be extended to all Member States in all E.U. waters. Delegates could not reconcile the apparent inconsistency in the UK approach.
25. Scallops have been a cause of concern especially in Eire where the fleet has been reduced through decommissioning by 75%. An apparent increase in the available effort for the French scallop fleet was explained by French delegates. Irish delegates were concerned about retaining access rights at the correct levels.
26. The WG agreed that consideration of future management of non-TAC species is as important as the work done so far on 7e Sole and other “crisis” matters. It is vital for the future work programme of the WG that good scientific advice is made available. Any proposals from the RAC must be evaluated properly for the social and economic consequences, including the effects on adjacent fisheries and areas. The earlier mistakes of the Commission must not be repeated by the RAC. It might sometimes be better to make no proposal rather than to make one that is ill-considered.
27. It was further agreed that the WGs of the NWWRAC should liaise closely with WGs established in other RACs so that knock-on effects of one set of proposals can be predicted and allowances made.
28. The future work programme will review the 1986 Mackerel Box to determine its utility.
29. Cetacean by-catch and the rules concerning acoustic “pingers” on gill-nets will be one of the work packages.
30. Regulation 850/98, the Technical Conservation Measures Regulation, is under scrutiny and will be considered by the RAC.
31. The list of Working Group topics is to include, but is not limited to:
 - Management of non-TACs species, Crabs, Scallops, Sea Bass, Sea Bream etc.
 - Mackerel Box.
 - Cetacean by-catch and “pingers”. (CFPO to submit a paper).
 - Technical Conservation Measures.

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32. A questionnaire will be circulated to delegates to determine those who wish to participate in subject-based sub-Working Groups to then feed information into the meetings of the Working Group. Venues, dates and names of facilitators will be derived from the questions. Papers will be invited from any and all who wish to contribute.
33. John Hermse to be invited to initiate the scallop discussions. Chris Venmore to be invited to initiate the crabs and other crustacean discussions. Don Thompson agreed to provide the basis for a crab discussion paper.
34. The RAC Secretariat will provide to delegates details, for example weblinks, to Commission papers and other working documents on subjects such as:-
 - The European Fisheries Fund.
 - Maximum Sustainable Yield.
 - Technical Conservation Measures Review.
 - Proposals for Deep-Sea stocks management.
 - A study into discards and their reduction.
35. Barrie Deas cautioned that the NWWRAC should do only what it can do well and not spread the work load too thin. Duplication of the work of others should be avoided.
36. It was agreed that all future work of the NWWRAC WGs must be programmed through the Secretariat. All papers are to be submitted to BIM. The Secretariat will produce the questionnaire and circulate it to members and to anyone that comes forward from now who has an interest in the work of the RAC and the fisheries under consideration.
37. Daniel Lefèvre closed the meeting at 1pm. Sam Lambourn thanked delegates for the lively debate and assured all that he would do his utmost to ensure, as a fisherman himself, that the NWWRAC will at all times consider the fishing communities whose future livelihoods depend on the fruits of the sea.

Rapporteur: Jim Portus