

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

DECLARATION

on management measures for breaking the cycle of decline for West of Scotland Demersal Fisheries

December 2012

1. Background

Conservation measures in the West of Scotland have been dominated by cod for over a decade. The conservation status of the area VIa cod stock has acted as a driver and has brought a range of restrictions on fishing activity which have had an indirect impact on fishing activities targeting a wide range of other species. The corrective measures applied have proved to be ineffective in rebuilding the cod biomass has not reached either precautionary nor limit reference levels. This experience contrasts with the North Sea where a modest but steady recovery is underway; and with the Celtic Sea which has remained outside both the EU Cod Recovery Plan (2003-2008) and the EU Multi-annual Management Plan for Cod (2009-present), but has succeeded in rebuilding the cod stocks due to management measures and strong recruitment.

In an attempt to find a solution to this problem, the NWWRAC held two technical Focus Group meetings on March and July 2012 to develop advice on a long term strategic approach to improve the knowledge of the stock and to agree workable measures that might help to the recovery of the stocks for the West of Scotland demersal mixed fisheries. The Focus Group was composed of the key NWWRAC stakeholders (fishing industry and other groups of interest) with expertise on the area, as well as invited scientific and economic experts. The two Focus Groups presented the outcomes of its work at the NWWRAC sub-regional working group meetings and Executive Committee meetings on July and September 2012, respectively.

As a result, the NWWRAC has succeeded in identifying a way forward and is now in a position to propose a new approach that is explained in a working paper titled *“Rebooting fisheries management in the West of Scotland and Irish Sea Demersal Fisheries: Breaking the Cycle of Decline”*. This is an official document that was unanimously adopted by the members of the NWWRAC in June 2012. A formal presentation of its main elements was made to the DG MARE in a bilateral meeting with the NWWRAC (13 July 2012) and subsequently to the Fisheries Committee of the European Parliament at a Public Hearing on the Review of the Cod Recovery Plan where the NWWRAC was invited (September 2012).

In parallel to this work, a discussion paper has been presented on main elements to achieve fully documented fisheries for the West of Scotland. This paper was adopted on September 2012.

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2. Timetable / proposed way forward

The NWWRAC now faces the task of building on these foundations to develop an Operational Plan for mixed fisheries in West of Scotland. The implementation plan will focus on a number of issues such as fully documented fisheries where further development is required. The NWWRAC intends to submit a proposal to the Commission, Member States and the European Parliament in the first quarter of 2013.

3. Main elements for a management plan for VIa cod in a context of mixed fisheries

A multi-layered but integrated approach in term of cod management is advocated, addressing:

- TAC setting
- Technical measures to control cod catches (e.g. improvements in gear selectivity, spatial closures, spatial and temporal closures with scientific evidence and assessment...)
- A move to a form of fully documented fisheries
- A collaborative partnership between scientists and industry
- Discard reduction and, in some cases, elimination
- Cod avoidance strategies
- Data deficiencies

4. NWWRAC proposals

4.1. Align TACs to set in line with total catches

In the West of Scotland, stronger landing controls and very low TACs over the period 2002- 2011 have led to an increase of discards.. STECF has concluded that TACs constrain landings but not catches. The NWWRAC has therefore concluded that n increase of TACs in line with total catches (landings + discards), in parallel with other measures to avoid or reduce cod catches, would help to rebuild the stock and control fishing mortality. Management measures would also be founded on as better information on total catch would be available.

4.2. Reduce fishing mortality in transition to Fmax:

The main challenge in the cod fishery is to control fishing mortality and bring it down to precautionary levels by establishing clear transition schemes and targets on F reduction through a combination of management measures and increase of TACs in line with total catches (landings + discards). The evidence suggests that there is no linear 1:1 relationship between reductions in fishing effort and reductions in fishing mortality. (STECF)

In line with the Commission's target fishing mortality for cod in the West of Scotland, the NWWRAC has outlined an alternative to the current failed instruments of TAC reductions and effort control: the NWWRAC will apply a transitional scheme to reduce fishing mortality from the current estimated value of $F=0.8$ to achieve F_{mp} (0.4) over a period of three years for those fleets targeting or having by-catches of cod in excess of the 1.5% of total catches. The NWWRAC might request ICES to look to establish specific reference points (including F_{pa} and values of F_{msy}) for VIa.

4.3. Data deficiencies:

Despite extensive observer programmes undertaken in the past, the main current data problem in the VIa fishery is the inadequacy in the survey data. Information used for tuning the assessment for VIa cod have recently been lost due to the curtailment of important stock surveys. This situation further impairs the robustness of the assessment and the confidence in the advisory process.

It has been highlighted by both scientists and NWWRAC members the need for a concerted effort to reconstruct a commercial tuning fleet(s) for the assessment. This is an area of shared responsibility of the fishing industry and the Member States. Both observer programmes onboard fishing vessels and innovative fisheries-science partnerships should be encouraged and supported by adequate funding from the EU and the Member States through their national marine institutes and laboratories.

The reconstruction of the data could be undertaken through an industry/scientist partnership, Policy managers could assist by creating as an incentive linked to an increase in TACs aligned to real catches (landings + discards). However, it is also important to manage expectations and make it clear that the availability of more information will not necessarily always lead to an increase in fishing quotas.

It is therefore crucial to set a clear framework and set of rules agreed by all relevant parties (scientists, managers, industry and other stakeholders) before adopting any further step. The NWWRAC will discuss this issue in detail with ICES at the next coordination meeting on data deficiencies (WKDDRAC3 January 2013).

4.4. Fully Documented Fisheries

In the context of the new approach described above, the NWWRAC wants to explore the possibility of establishing fully documented fisheries (FDF), in the Area VI demersal fisheries with the understanding that CCTV may not necessarily be the most appropriate tool for all fleets and métiers. The Commission has recently submitted a request to the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) to develop proposals on FDF based on reference fleets, where observers or cameras would be placed on a small number of vessels and the catch composition used for comparative purposes. The outcomes of the EFCA study might help to identify good alternative forms of FDF to CCTV.

Within the approach described above there would be no need for an effort control regime so long as cod avoidance plans with specific measures and implementation targets are in place and some form of effective fully documented fisheries is achieved. Under an effective fully documented fishery which records total catch, rather than just landings, and where there is confidence that catch is within the permitted allocations, effort control would be redundant and it should be removed. The critical issue here would be transparency and accountability, so managers feel confident that the system works and actual catches reported are accurate. Also the alignment of incentives to the fulfillment of management objectives might help the industry to abide by a fully documented fisheries approach. A desktop study might be useful to look at ideas in other parts of the world.

The concept of fisheries having a low impact on cod fishing mortality will need to be clearly assessed defined against associated data.

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