



DISCUSSION PAPER

IRISH SEA MIXED DEMERSAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

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DUN LAOGHAIRE – DUBLIN**

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1. Main purpose

The Focus Group will exchange views on the existing scientific knowledge as well as the management measures applicable for Irish Sea stocks. The purpose of this dialogue is to improve understanding of what the issues are and find common grounds for agreement with the view to produce a NWWRAC paper which contains firm scientific based and/or supported proposals for a sustainable management of cod and sole stocks.

2. What has been done so far?

In developing a long-term plan for demersal fisheries in the Irish Sea, the NWWRAC has consistently been thwarted by the limited scientific understanding of why a wide range of management measures have not led to a rebuilding of the cod stocks, against expectations, contrary to both the experience of the North Sea and the broad trends across the North East Atlantic.

ICES have identified a truncated age structure for cod and the assessment models employed suggest a significant level of unaccounted mortality. It also seems that there is a big difference in perception about the stock size between scientists (low stock size) and the fishermen (much higher size).

Against this background, the NWWRAC believes that it will be difficult to make progress with either rebuilding the cod stock in the Irish Sea, or developing a long term management plan, until the source of the unaccounted mortality is effectively identified.

The ICES benchmark meeting for Irish Sea cod in 2012 was useful in reconfirming this problem and pointing to the data deficiencies that to date have limited ICES ability to address it. In the meantime, the NWWRAC has reiterated its request for an audit of Irish Sea Cod, meaning a thorough and comprehensive scientific effort to identify the reasons impeding stock recovery, despite a range of management measures including:

- The end of directed whitefish fisheries
- A large seasonal spawning closure
- Extensive fleet decommissioning
- Increased selectivity
- Effort regime
- Increased landing controls



The Commission has acceded to the RAC's request in 2012 that such an audit be included in the Commission's memorandum of understanding with ICES for 2013.

The NWWRAC stands ready to help ICES address any data deficiencies that might impede an effective understanding of the fisheries or stock developments that might be relevant in identifying or allocating weight to specific sources of cod mortality.

A number of data deficiencies "bottlenecks" have been identified by the scientists as difficult to resolve for the moment. The NWWRAC is currently involved in an initiative to develop collaborative work with ICES to mitigate data deficiencies for several stocks. The Commission has encouraged the NWWRAC to further contribute to improving the stocks assessment, in particular by providing catches and discards data.

The NWWRAC understand the relevant ICES Working Group, will be meeting shortly and we hope that progress will be made towards the cod audit – principally identifying and weighting the sources of mortality that are responsible for impeding the recovery of cod in the Irish Sea.

Such insights as ICES could provide in this respect would be very useful for the anticipated regional seas meeting between member states with fleets which fish in the Irish Sea, stakeholders and scientists to address the main fisheries challenges in the Irish Sea, principle amongst which is cod recovery.

There are also two ongoing fisheries-science partnership projects in UK (one industry-led "sentinel fishery") to look at the cod and other demersal stocks in the Irish Sea. Whilst there is debate that the catch trends from these projects mirror the ICES findings, the commercial catches are higher. Both projects give a results in terms of cod catches with a different age structure that what ICES determines to be the case. In addition the picture is complicated by the adoption by the Northern Irish fleet of "highly selective gears", designed primarily to release cod from the catch.

Ongoing discussions are currently being held between the Commission, the NWWRAC and ICES about the elements for an audit for Irish Sea mixed demersal fisheries.



3. What needs to be done?

At the last NWWRAC Focus Group on a Mixed Fisheries Plan for the Irish Sea (Dublin Castle, 5 July 2012), Norman Graham (Marine Institute) identified four steps to be completed that can be used as basis for discussion at this meeting. These steps are:

- 1. Carry out the single stock assessments first.**
- 2. Look at all the technical interactions and map the area.**
- 3. Identify the priority actions and fix the objectives.**
- 4. Take account of economic and social aspects.**

Dr. Graham suggested that a bio-economic model might be the best tool to analyse all these variables so to solve the problem.

ICES received a special request from the Commission in 2013 to explore the sources of unaccounted mortality on Irish Sea Cod, which was agreed on the back of NWWRAC requests for the same.

Commission's official request to ICES:

"ICES are asked to further explore these possible causes and to identify, and where possible detail, any other factors which may contribute to the high mortality of the stock. In doing so ICES are asked to determine if there is a single factor or a possible combination of factors which need to be addressed to aid rebuilding of the stock. ICES are further asked to identify any additional data that is required and to identify and if possible address any other concerns in the assumptions made in the modeling of this stock"

ICES working group will be looking at this soon. The majority of the issues raised have been explored at a benchmark, i.e. the factors that might cause this unallocated mortality. ICES suggest there is little more they can add with the available information, but it is agreed they can look at what additional data is required. To some extent this has already been done in the UK for cod and in Belgium for sole, but it needs to be progressed and this will be one desired outcome from this meeting.

Finally, a first version of the ANIFPO-AFBI paper on a multi-species management plan for the Irish Sea, from a Northern Ireland fleet perspective, was presented in the previous NWWRAC Focus Group in July 2012. A revised version is now expected as a result of various comments received from NWWRAC members and project coordination meetings of a Steering Group. One issue with this project is how the data collected can be applied to commercial fisheries.

National initiatives from Member States: UK and Belgium fisheries-science partnerships (FSP)

The Northern Irish Governmental Department (DARD) and the national scientific institute (AFBI) are currently putting a proposal together that seeks to address the data deficiencies in the Irish Sea cod fishery. This proposal will be based, among other evidences, in a tagging based study, and a report will be provided at this NWWRAC Focus Group meeting.



Other UK's FSP projects include a "commercial" survey in the Irish Sea that has been ongoing for the past 10 years. The UK's FSP programme is changing and this offers the opportunity to put in place an initiative that could include the cod audit advocated by the NWWRAC.

Furthermore, additional funding would be required for such type of projects and it is worthy to examine the potential for an EFF project that would look at applying some of the Ecosystem based approach work for development of a 'mixed fisheries' plan for the Irish Sea. An EFF bid could be obtained from Ireland or Northern Ireland to progress this plan. In summary, the problem lies not in the funding itself but rather in finding the adequate (human and time) resources to advance the issue.

A Belgian fisheries-science partnership EU funded project lead by ILVO and Rederscentrale is carrying out a similar study in relation to Irish Sea Sole fishery in Belgian vessels.

4. Bibliography / Reference Documents

- COD VIIA
Output from the ICES benchmark workshops and working group.
- SOLE VIIa
ILVO/Rederscentrale Project
- NORTH WESTERN WATERS RAC
Report from the NWWRAC Focus Group meetings on Irish Sea Fisheries Management
 - Belfast, 30 September 2009
 - Dublin Castle, 5 July 2012

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