NORTH WESTERN WATERS REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

SUMMARY NOTE
STATE OF PLAY OF DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN COMMISSION AND MEMBER STATES

DISCUSSION PAPER ON PROPOSALS OF MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR SEABASS

July 2013

BACKGROUND

The DG MARE launched a non-paper in 2012 addressed to concerned Member States exploring the possibility of introducing a TAC for seabass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*). Such paper was produced in response to the decreasing trends in the stock; and discussed at several meetings of the Management Committee for Fisheries held between Commission, ICES and Member States in the second half of 2012.

The idea of setting a TAC was found by the majority of Member States involved a bit premature, since ICES would benchmark the stock in late 2012. The latest meeting on this topic took place on the 22 May 2013, to explore management options now that the benchmark has already taken place.

SCIENTIFIC CONSIDERATIONS – STOCK ASSESSMENT AND ICES ADVICE

Based on the outcomes of the ICES benchmark and the relevant ICES Working Groups in 2013, the stock perception has not changed since last year and it remains in low levels, with the following features:

- F is high, SSB and recruitment levels in recent years are low.
- There is a substantial migration of the species when young, but when mature, populations tend to reside in small local areas.
- Landings are increasing; seabass is caught with many gear types, both demersal and pelagic, inshore and offshore. Discards up to 12% in trawl fisheries.
- Recreational fisheries overall could contribute 20% to fishing mortality.
- Uncertainty about stock identity, but Southern waters need to be considered separately.
- The dynamics of the stock indicate that we need to protect spawning areas.
- Most urgent measures would be a capping of fishing effort and an increase on selectivity.

ICES are likely to recommend a precautionary reduction in catch of 20% for 2014 – if there was a TAC for 2014 it would be immediately less from current catch levels by 20% for 2014, which implies a possibility of the same for the following year.

MEMBER STATES VIEWS – MANAGEMENT PROPOSALS

A wide range of proposals have been provided by Member States:

- Need to consider several management plans for the stock, given the variety of fisheries concerned. Also consider spatial/seasonal closures.

- Before a TAC is considered to be introduced, commercial data must be gathered for establishing any allocation key.

- A management plan is a good idea in the long term, but a short term solution is needed: this could be done through selectivity measures and effort restrictions. A proposal to increase MLS could be moderately increased to, for example 40cm.

- Some MS would be in favour of a TAC to be inserted in 2014. Discards due to MLS, so increasing MLS could be counterproductive. Management plan is good for the long term, but TAC could help stop biomass decline in the short term. Separate TAC areas should be set on management grounds (NS; Channel; Celtic Sea, Irish Sea and WoS; BoB; Iberian waters).

- France is launching a study on spatial closures but it will take several years to get results.

- Seabass is a by-catch in some mullet fisheries. Bag limits exist for recreational fishery. Mesh size should be considered to protect juveniles.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Action is required to safeguard the stock. A management plan is an interesting option in the long term (and it would need to be examined if and how recreational fisheries can be included). But first we need to identify measures that can be put in place quickly.

A suitable approach may be a combination of selectivity and effort restrictions. Member States have been invited to discuss possible management measures, and suggest feasible options to increase selectivity and cap effort.

WAY FORWARD: TIMETABLE

The Commission has requested Member States are requested to send their proposals in writing by the 15 July 2013, including supporting information on suggested management measures they have identified and could implement. The DG MARE might consider, depending on MS feedback and availability of resources, organising a follow-up meeting in the second half of July 2013. The DG MARE has agreed to brief the interested RACs at upcoming meetings about this issue.

ANNEX I.

Management proposals from DEFRA

Consultation submitted to the NWWRAC Secretariat

Date: 10 July 2013

Suggested selectivity improvements

- A requirement to move from the current minimum mesh size range (i.e. 80-99mm towed, 90-99mm fixed) to the next mesh size range for those targeting bass (i.e. 70% of catch) to 100mm+ for both towed gear and fixed gear (gillnets etc).

- For non-targeting activity at less than 70% of the catch, working with the smaller mesh size range in management areas with sea bass nursery areas (where trawl discards are highest at 12%) a requirement for a square mesh panel (essentially a 90mm SMP in 80mm gear) for towed gear in specified areas - ref. FSP project: http://www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/media/345662/fsp_bass_09_report.final.pdf

- To consider the above suggested SMP requirement for bass management in the context of areas with existing requirements, cod recovery measures in 2056/2001 have SMP requirements that apply in IV, and 2549/2000 has an SMP requirement in the Irish Sea. 737/2012 includes SMP requirements for the Celtic Sea that cover VII f & g for bottom trawls. Taking these into account, for bass nursery area protection purposes this suggests the above SMP requirement to apply for bottom and mid water otter trawls in VII d, e, and mid water trawls in VIIf&g.

DEFRA is seeking technical advice on whether for optimum selectivity a 100mm SMP requirement to apply in the above areas/gears for the targeting mesh size range of 100mm+ is needed.

The UK already has 37 designated Bass nursery areas with fishing restrictions in domestic legislation – they will be expecting similar action from other Member States that have such nursery areas on their coast.

Effort reduction

- A ban on pair trawling in the main spawning area (in VIIe,h) during the spawning months (January – April).

- A licence limitation for UK vessels restricting catches of sea bass to 1.5 tonnes a month (there is a current licence restriction at 5 tonnes a week, which in practice does not impose much of a restriction). Based on 2012 as an example, UK catches last year per vessel above 1.5 tonnes per month, reflecting targeting activity, totalled 166 tonnes – which of the total 890 tonnes landed means such a licence limitation would have reduced the catch by 19% - which if applied from this year, by limiting targeting activity and combined with a suggested restriction on pair trawling during the spawning months, should bring down overall effort to reflect the ICES recommendation for a 20% reduction in catches, at least as far as UK is concerned. We would however be looking for verification of proportionate undertakings from other Member States for similar licence restrictions for their vessels.

- Such a licence restriction in 2012 would have affected the catches of 54 UK vessels: 24 vessels that landed up to one tonne (in total) over the monthly limit over the course of the year, 8 vessels that landed up to 2 tonnes in total over the monthly limit in 2012, 13 vessels at up to 6 tonnes, and 9 vessels over 6 tonnes, to a maximum of 24 tonnes for one vessel – a total of 166 tonnes. The pattern of exploitation by UK vessels is reasonably stable from year to year, suggesting a restriction at 1.5 tonnes per month will provide an effective control measure.

- As the Portuguese have advocated managing sea bass in Southern waters separately, we would want to see assurances of licence conditions issued to their vessels to limit their fishing for bass to VIII & IX (i.e. to prevent diversion of effort from there to IV, VII) which would probably mean a reciprocal licence restriction for EU vessels normally fishing in IV or VII to prevent diversion of effort down to VIII & IX.