



CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR
LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES
SEPTENTRIONALES

NORTH WESTERN
WATERS
ADVISORY COUNCIL

CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA
LAS AGUAS
NOROCCIDENTALES

MINUTES

FOCUS GROUP Seabass management

BIM
Tuesday 15th March 2016

Chair: Barrie Deas
Rapporteur: Barbara Schoute

1. Welcome and introductions

Barrie Deas welcomed the members and the attendees to the meeting. Caroline Gamblin sent her apologies. The full list of participants is included as an annex to these minutes. The agenda¹ was adopted as drafted.

The Chair recalled the “Action Points” from the meeting of 3rd February in Paris, as follows:

1. The objectives for managing this stock;
2. To prepare a long-term, multi-annual plan leading to MSY within the legal timeframe;
3. To review and evaluate the current (interim) management measures;
4. To consider and include the effects of the Landing Obligation;
5. To include the impacts on the stock of all métiers.

The Chair also highlighted the previous Inter-AC meetings on seabass and emphasised the importance of engaging the scientific community to work with the various sectors and interest groups and expressed collective gratitude to the scientists for attending the focus group meeting.

The Chair summed up the collected knowledge and identified the many knowledge gaps. The presence of more than one stock serves to confuse the understanding of Biomass and Fishing Mortality trends. The chair cautioned that the 2 tranches of measures, already introduced and overlapping, have not yet been evaluated for their effect, either beneficial or otherwise. It was noted that it is important, for social and economic reasons, that measures should be sufficient to achieve stock recovery objectives, but should avoid unnecessary hardship. It was also considered important that all métiers contributing to Fishing Mortality bear an equitable weight of all management measures necessary.

The Chair mentioned that the NSAC also had a seabass Focus Group chaired by Mike Pawson who had been the acknowledged Seabass expert in CEFAS, before retirement. Members were informed that, although the North Sea seabass fishery is smaller than the Channel fishery, the work the NSAC are

¹ All relevant documents to the meeting can be found at the NWWAC website: [link](#)



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doing will be usefully shared with the NWWAC, so that there is less risk of over-lapping and unnecessary repetition.

2. Presentation on Current management measures and effects (Mickael Drogou, Ifremer)

Michael Drogou presented an evaluation of the impact of measures introduced to date. There had been a sharp decline in landings since mid-2015, which was much higher than that recorded in the ICES advice.

Scientists consider that recruitment may be impacted to a greater extent by marine environment factors than by human intervention.

It was noted that fishermen react immediately to regulatory constraints in order to stay fishing and to maintain their economic activity and as such it was highlighted that there could be unintended consequences of management measures for seabass if fishermen divert to other fisheries, such as hake.

Evaluation of the effects of the current measures will take time since seabass juveniles take about 5 years before they mature. As a result, recruits saved by the current measures will not appear in the spawning stock biomass for a number of years. It was also noted that the recovery of a stock often takes more time than first thought, because there may not be a direct effect of measures on the biomass (for example it took 25 years for the biomass of Atlanto Scandic herring to recover, although fishing mortality was sufficiently low, to expect a much quicker recovery).

It was noted that the impacts on the driftnet fishery, efforts by Ireland (where seabass is not allowed to be landed) and effort reductions, should also be taken into account in an evaluation. It was noted also that the scientists have little information on the industry reactions to the September 2015 regime changes. As a result the stock assessment and evaluation may be slow to react once this information is received. Concerns were also voiced that the present measures are still lagging behind the ICES advice.

With regard to the introduction of the Landing Obligation it is clear that due to the status of the stock seabass will likely become a “choke” species, both in Member States where seabass is banned by national legislation, and in Member States where a fishery is on-going and fished under current EU rules. The current bycatch limits for seabass cause the stock to be subject to the Landing Obligation since it is classified as ‘subject to catch limits’. It was important to note that as seabass is a non-TAC species, international swapping and other flexibilities cannot be used to prevent such “choking”. Members were informed that this item had been discussed at the Member State Workshop on Quota swapping in Copenhagen (11 March 2016) and will be discussed in future at Workshops and meetings on seabass with Member States.

3. Presentation of Benchmark results and planning (Lisa Readdy, CEFAS)

The group was informed that ICES wants to improve the assessment by first improving the basic input data, such as that from recreational catches and wishes to finalise improvements before the 2016 assessment. A further benchmark is being considered, possibly in 2017, to deal with bigger issues, such as the stock distribution and reference points.



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Information on the stock showed that migration patterns are important, and recruitment was considered susceptible to cold winters. The fisheries showed rapid changes: when landings in 1985-1995 were low, they doubled in the next decade and have been stable since (except for 2014, when bad weather reduced catching opportunities). Since 2015, the fishing patterns have changed due to the emergency measures that were introduced.

Bill Brock commented that gillnetters (GND) in the UK adapted to the 2015 measures by increased mesh size to ensure compliance with new 42cm MCRS in order to avoid the discarding of “immature” fish. The meeting agreed that dead discards were of no conservation benefit.

Although the protection of seabass nursery areas was shown to have worked to assist the growth of juvenile seabass, the path of migration from these nurseries gives rise to targeted fisheries. Although the use of non-selective gears in these areas may cause additional mortality of under MCRS fish, this may be avoided by temporal closures of certain areas. CEFAS indicated they would be interested in studying the spatial management of seabass conservation, specifically the migration pathways around nursery areas.

4. Short term advice

The meeting was informed that the French industry had informed the EC Commission that the 1% by-catch rule was too low, and caused dead fish to be discarded that could be landed for economic benefit with no increase in mortality. The French proposed to increase the 1% by-catch rule to 3%, or 5% for each trip. The Chair commented that the problem of high, incidental bycatches of seabass is shared in the UK fishery, where it was noted that fish in excess of the 1% by-catch are dead.

The EC Commission indicated that it would need to be satisfied that increasing the bycatch allowances would not lead to the negation of this measure intended to protect the stock and result in no effect on fishing practices and lead to “business as usual”. The Commission informed the meeting that it would be essential for any management request or proposal to prove that a change of behaviour would take place.

The meeting supported the proposal to increase the by-catch rule from 1% to 5% for each trip when total seabass catches would be limited to 600 kgs each month, while at the same time there should be additional work done in other areas such as spatial management of more selective gears (e.g. the use of increased mesh size on fish migration routes and the potential for seasonal closures of particular areas).

The meeting agreed that measures that could create more discards of dead fish should be avoided or modified, without increasing fishing mortality. Measures that reduce discards below the new MCRS should be supported, and measures that provide a disincentive for targeted fishing should be investigated.

5. Longer Term Advice

The meeting produced a first draft of advice consisting of two stages. The first stage consisted of the request for the immediate adaptation of measures, and the second stage listed a number of possible measures to be evaluated for further improvement in the state of the seabass stock. The second stage



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was considered an important part of the balance between the immediate action required to adapt current management measures; and the future improvements of fisheries management that need to be considered on the basis of the results of scientific evaluation.

The group also discussed the need for a meeting between Member States and the Advisory Councils involved, together with the EC to set up the terms and objectives for a Multi-Annual Plan. The distribution of the stock across the North Sea and North Western Waters makes it imperative to consider whether or not the plan should cover the total stock area or should be split between the North Sea and North Western Waters. Such a plan should include all métiers.

The Focus Group agreed to produce a Framework advice document for consideration by the Executive Committee, which would be sent to the EC Commission if and when adopted.

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Annex 1 – List of Participants

NWWAC members	
Barrie Deas	National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations
Jim Portus	South Western Fish Producer Organisation
Hugo Boyle	Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation
Bill Brock	South Western Fish Producer Organisation
John Crudden	European Anglers Alliance
Geert Meun	Stichting van de Nederlandse Visserij / Dutch Fisheries Organisation (2)
Observers	
Mickael Drogou	Ifremer, Brest
Robert Griffin	European Commission
Lisa Readdy	CEFAS
NWWAC Secretariat	
Barbara Schoute	Deputy Executive Secretary