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FRAMEWORK FOR ADVICE

Seabass management in North Western Waters

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Background

ICES considers seabass in EU waters to consist of four stocks although stock structure is somewhat unclear. The largest stock is found in the North Sea, Celtic sea and the Channel, where recommended sustainable catches have been reduced substantially, from 1155 t in 2015 to 541 t in 2016. ICES recommends that a management plan is developed for this stock, with an urgent requirement to reduce the fishing mortality (F) for all fleet segments and recreational fisheries. As seabass is a harvested species, it is covered by the CFP's legal requirement to manage the stock at F_{MSY} by 2020 at the latest. ICES advice indicates that the stock is rapidly heading towards the lowest biomass reference point (B_{lim}) with implications for impaired recruitment.

ICES plans to update the current assessment for seabass in 2016, and intends to organise a full benchmark for the stock in 2017. Significant improvements to catch data are also needed, as discard levels of small fish are unknown and recreational landings (catches minus released fish) have not always been fully recorded.

Management measures

In response to the scientific advice, the following measures, relevant to North Western Waters, have been adopted by the EU:

- a. Management measures in 2015 ([EC regulations](#)):
 - i. A ban on pelagic trawling (February to April 2015)
 - ii. A maximum retained catch of 3 seabass per day in recreational fisheries (April to December)
 - iii. Monthly catch limits for different demersal fishing gears (July to December)
 - iv. Increase of the minimum landing size from 36 cm to 42cm (permanent measure)
- b. Management measures in 2016 ([EC 72/2016 Art 10](#)):
 - i. A moratorium on fishing for seabass (recreational and professional fisheries) from January to June with the following exceptions:
 - a) demersal trawls and seines are allowed a 1% bycatch limit for seabass;
 - b) hook and line and fixed gill nets are banned only in February and March, and allowed a monthly catch limit in other months.
 - ii. From July to December monthly catch limits apply to all vessels and a maximum retained catch of 1 seabass per day in recreational fisheries.



Landing Obligation

The Landing Obligation is being phased-in and will be fully implemented by 2019. Although seabass is currently not under TAC management, the current management application of 'catch limits' would imply that EC 1380/13 Article 15 is applicable for seabass. This means that in demersal fisheries all catches of seabass will have to be landed when seabass is included under the demersal Landing Obligation. Currently in pelagic fisheries there is an obligation to land all bycatches of seabass.

Long Term Management Plans

It is the understanding of the NWWAC, that Multi-Annual Plans (MAPs) will define fishing mortality levels but will leave considerable scope for the development of specific measures adapted to regional seas. One of the fundamental purposes of a multi-species MAP is to balance the fishing mortality of the main economic species in a mixed demersal fishery. There are specific issues to be addressed in the application of regional MAPs for widely distributed stocks, such as seabass. The choice to incorporate this stock in the North Sea and/or the North Western Waters MAP or to develop a single species MAP for seabass should, therefore, be considered carefully. The NWWAC considers that cooperation between the relevant regions for straddling stocks is a vital element of the protection of the seabass stock in the North Sea, Celtic sea and the Channel.

Further input is needed for the NWWAC to provide additional advice on this topic, in due course. The NWWAC advocates that a meeting between the relevant Member States, EC and Advisory Councils is held to establish an effective dialogue on this stock. This meeting should consider:

- How to ensure that the management of the stock will adhere to the MSY timetable detailed in the CFP;
- How the stock should be managed; a regional multi-species MAP or as a separate, species-specific MAP;
- Management measures adapted to the specific métiers targeting the species;
- Incentives, which could improve the delivery of catch data.

Evaluation of existing measures

NWWAC gives the highest priority to an evaluation of the impact of current management measures, on both the recovery of the stock and their effectiveness in terms of reduced fishing mortality. It is important, as a general principle, to avoid adding additional layers of measures before the current management measures have been evaluated.

Scientific experts have indicated that it is too soon to fully evaluate the impact of existing measures implemented from September 2015 (e.g. the MCRS of 42cm and restrictive monthly catch limits),



due to the stock biology, which is driven primarily by success of recruitment; which in turn, is extremely dependant on environmental influences. Control of fishing mortality is, therefore, the only tool at our disposal.

The NWWAC stresses that the economic consequences of measures should also be closely monitored, as displacement of fisheries and impacts on other fisheries may have unintended and negative effects.

NWWAC advice for seabass in the North Western Waters

Although complete information is not yet available, the signs are that the package of measures adopted in 2015 and for 2016 have already had a significant effect in reducing landings of seabass across a number of métiers. Nevertheless, the NWWAC considers that some aspects of the measures adopted require refinement, especially where they have resulted in an increase in discards, rather than a reduction in fishing mortality.

This pertains specifically to Article 10.2 of the TAC regulation EU 72/2016, where fishing vessels deploying demersal trawls and seines during January to June 2016, are subject to a moratorium on catching seabass, but may retain on board, catches of seabass up to 1 % of the weight of the total catch.

Because of the mixed nature of the fisheries concerned, avoiding catches of seabass is not generally possible. Although avoidance is possible to a limited degree in some circumstances, generally it is not possible to eliminate accidental bycatch in most mixed fisheries. This measure will, therefore, not result in a reduction of fishing mortality for these fleet components, but will only cause an increase in discarding.

The NWWAC therefore recommends a different approach in two stages:

Stage one.

Replacing the 1% bycatch maximum for each trip with a 5% bycatch limit for each trip would allow a high percentage of the accidental bycatches of seabass to be landed, instead of being returned to the sea as dead discards. This should be combined with a suggested maximum allocation of 600 kg of seabass each month to act as a disincentive to targeted fisheries. This would require an amendment to the TAC Regulation Art 10.2 second (a).

This point is not supported by the recreational fisheries members of the NWWAC due to the lack of scientific evaluation of the effects of such a measure.



Stage two.

Although an increase in the bycatch limit from 1% to 5% would reduce discards of seabass, the NWWAC recognises that this will not, in itself, reduce fishing mortality compared to measures in place in 2016, although it will ensure a reduction compared to the historical activity of this fleet.

The NWWAC considers it important to evaluate management measures that are both ecologically and economically sustainable, prior to any management decisions. Without any *a priori* commitment, the NWWAC suggests that the following measures should be evaluated by STECF¹:

1. Improving the selectivity of trawls by varying the net geometry;
2. Efficiency of additional spatial and/or temporal measures;
3. Improving selectivity of driftnets targeting seabass by increasing mesh size to be consistent with MCRS of 42 cm;
4. Implementing a control and monitoring system based on tags, for recreational fisheries;
5. Implementing a telephone/web-based approach for improving catch recording in the recreational sector.

As the socio-economic and ecological effects of such measures have not yet been fully explored, the NWWAC will reserve judgement until this information is available.

It is important that the AC would be involved in the evaluation process, and that, at local level, there is strong cooperation between fishermen and scientists on the development of these potential measures.

¹ Detailed descriptions can be found in the Annex



Annex to the NWWAC advice on Seabass

NWWAC suggestions of measures to be evaluated by STECF:

1. Improve the selectivity of demersal towed gears for seabass by varying the net geometry in mixed demersal fisheries. This will require vessel trials, which are under preparation in the UK. Cooperation between fishermen and scientists is crucial for these developments to be successful.
2. The AC suggests (without any prior commitment) that STECF be asked to evaluate access rules to control fishing mortality in entry and exit zones adjacent to existing bass nursery areas.

The French professionals' representatives do not agree with this proposal because the definition of seabass nursery areas is unclear and the effect of additional spatial and/or temporal measures has not been evaluated for the seabass population. For this reason French professionals want to have a reflection, within the AC, on the efficiency of spatial and/or temporal management measures to reduce seabass fishing mortality.

3. The measures prior to 2017 have effectively banned driftnet fisheries for seabass between January and June, with monthly catch limits from July to December. Fishers from France and the UK consider this to be an extreme and draconian measure, which carries serious socio-economic consequences. Accepting the need to reduce targeted fishing on seabass, the NWWAC considers it appropriate for STECF to evaluate the following refinement for 2017:

From January to December, a minimum meshsize of 110 mm is used for driftnets targeting bass. This is held to be consistent with the increased MCRS of 42 cm. Monthly catch limits should apply to quarters 1 and 4 only, effectively creating a six month summer ban.

Driftnet fishers targeting other species with meshsizes < 110 mm, would still be subject to the existing 2016 rules.

4. For recreational fisheries, the AC would be interested to know if a management system based on tags (similar to those used in some recreational salmon and tuna fisheries) could result in a more sustainable fishery, and how this might be implemented for recreational fisheries on seabass. For instance, it would be necessary to work out some details such as the anticipated number of tags required and their distribution between Member States and thereafter to anglers. It would also be necessary to determine who would administer the system and how such a system would be implemented (funding mechanism etc.)



5. The NWWAC requests that the Commission consider improvements of the electronic logbook system in order to improve data collection and enforcement and that the potential for a telephone or web-based logbook application for the recreational sector is evaluated.
6. Recreational anglers suggest that for those recreational fishermen using such an application, that a monthly catch limit could be created instead of the present daily bag limit of 1 seabass and suggest a maximum of 25 seabass each month. An evaluation of the appropriate monthly catch limit could be carried out by STECF.

This evaluation should consider:

- The importance of improvement of catch data time series (real-time);
- The use of monthly reporting as a safeguard measure; If catches exceed the anticipated or appropriate amount, catch limits could be changed in-year;
- The coexistence of an electronic reporting system with the present daily bag-limit scheme, allowing anglers to choose to follow the existing scheme or sign up to an electronic system;
- The funding mechanism for an electronic reporting system. Costs could be recovered in part or in full by a small fee charged by telephone call or to a telephone bill.

The suggestion for an improved reporting mechanism and its evaluation was not supported by the other members of the NWWAC, as it was considered that this does not ensure a reduction in recreational fishing mortality.

The NWWAC reiterates that the main principle for management of seabass should be an equal sharing of the burden between all (commercial and recreational) fisheries.